

No 45

5 CENTS

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE
STORY

WEEKLY.

EVERY
WEEK.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE'S · BUCKET ·
BRIGADE ;
OR, TRAPPING A FIRE-BUG. *By ROBERT LENNOX*



With Joe, Terry and Trot close at his heels, the firebug dashed down the alley. "We'll put the fire out for him!" thundered Young Wide Awake. Hal soused the wretch, but Young Wide Awake dropped bucket and water together on his head.

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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Young Wide Awake's Bucket Brigade

OR,

TRAPPING A FIREBUG

By ROBERT LENNOX

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TRAIL OF A FIRE-BUG.

Clang! clang!

It is not altogether pleasant on a cold night to roll over in a warm bed and leap out to the floor.

That was what twenty-eight boys of Belmont had to do, all at about the same time.

Belmont's firm alarm was ringing.

There being an alarm gong over the head of each bed occupied by a member of the Washington No. 1 Volunteer Fire Company, every one of the twenty-eight was on his feet in an instant.

There was tremendously hurried dressing, and then as many boys darted from their homes.

Those who lived nearest to the engine house ran there to drag out the engine and the hose carriage.

Some dozen of the fellows, however, headed for Main Street, knowing they could easily join the apparatus there.

Hardly three minutes passed from the first note on the fire alarm to the moment when ever-reliable Washington One rattled around the corner of Holmes Street into Main.

Though the full crew was not yet on the ropes, yet those who did "run with the machines" fairly made them travel.

Just ahead of the engine and hose crews ran Dick Halstead, captain of Washington One.

He was more commonly named Young Wide Awake, and never did young fireman better deserve the title.

He was a born fireman, cool, daring and full of resource.

At his side ran Lieutenant Hal Norton.

Back of them, at the head of the engine crew, was Joe Darrell, foreman of the enginemen.

At the rear came Terry Rourke, another foreman, and his hose crew.

Straight down Main Street they headed now for a section near the water-front.

The swift motion thoroughly roused boys who five minutes before had been sound asleep, for it was now nearly midnight.

This being a first alarm, and in Washington's district, the only other apparatus to turn out was Hook and Ladder One, a men's company, headed by big, hustling Tom Scott.

But Young Wide Awake was acting chief until the arrival of Chief Pelton.

A few men, here and there, appeared, despite the lateness of the hour, and ran in a straggling line after the young firemen.

"A cellar fire," grunted Young Wide Awake to his lieutenant, as they darted across the last block before that in which the fire was.

Both could see smoke coming in a fair-sized cloud out through the ground-level windows of a cellar.

The building was an almost ramshackle affair of two stories.

On the ground floor were two stores—one a meat store, the other a small and dingy dry-goods store.

On the second floor of this building were squalid tenements of some of the poorest people in Belmont.

"Swing in there by the hydrant, Joe, and couple on," shouted our hero. "Hold your stream until I see what we're up against."

With a rush the young fellows of the engine crew took their places at the pumping bars on either side, while Terry Rourke's crew rapidly unreeled the hose and helped Joe to make the swift coupling.

"Follow me, Hal," directed Young Wide Awake, as he lighted a lantern.

One other sprang to our hero's side.

He was Ted Lester, fourteen years old, and the youngest member of the company.

But he had the good luck to be the cousin of Miss Kitty Lester, Young Wide Awake's sweetheart.

Many people imagined that that fact gave Ted much prominence in the Washington company, but it did not.

Young Wide Awake never played a favorite in the company.

He liked Ted's work because it was good.

Ted usually ran at the side of his young chief, serving as aide and carrying orders.

The store was dark and deserted. Its door was locked.

"Hand me that axe, Ted," ordered Young Wide Awake.

Seizing the implement, the young captain struck a few vigorous blows on the door around the lock.

The door gave under that treatment, and the three young firemen rushed in.

There was some smoke already in the store, coming up between the floor boardings.

"Smell anything but smoke?" queried Young Wide Awake, as they made their way hastily to the rear of the store.

"Gasoline," returned Lieutenant Hal, drily.

"Smells like it."

Young Wide Awake had found what he sought—a small trap-door at the back of the store.

He bent and raised this, only to be greeted by a rush of smoke that came up through the opened trap.

"Go back and tell Joe to have the hose ready to hand in through a cellar window when I call for it," directed our hero, and Ted sped off on his errand.

Young Wide Awake and Hal ran down the narrow flight of steps, held their breath and darted forward through the stifling smoke.

The smoke was the dense, rasping kind that comes from the burning of cloth.

"Here we are!" cried Young Wide Awake. "It's going to be easy, too."

He stopped before a pile of packing boxes, so arranged that they reached from the floor almost to the ceiling.

The lowermost of these were burning with fair briskness. The boxes in the middle of the pile were just beginning to burn. Those on top had not yet caught.

"Call for the hose, Hal."

Crash! With a splintering of glass the hose came through.

Our hero and his friend grabbed the nozzle, holding it on the top of the blaze.

"Send down three or four axemen!" shouted Young Wide Awake. "Now, play away, Washington One!"

The stream came with a spurt.

Hiss! whizz-zz! It struck the burning wood with a sharp sputter.

Down the cellar stairs ran four of the young firemen, led by Terry Rourke, Young Wide Awake's gallant, good-natured, yet pugnacious chum.

"Roll those top cases off, Terry! Get 'em out of the way!"

Terry and his fellows bent to the work with a will, never minding the occasional splash they got from the stream.

The second layer of boxes, that had just begun to burn when the stream started, were soon only smoldering.

These, too, Terry and his fellows now hustled off the pile.

Three minutes more, and the lowermost boxes, half-burned, were reduced to smoldering.

Calling Ted to take his place with Hal at the nozzle, Young Wide Awake stepped over to where Terry and his fellows now rested.

"Tap some of these cases open, Terry," commanded Young Wide Awake, drily. "I want to see what's in them."

Smash! smash! A case was opened, almost reduced to kindling wood, in fact.

"Excelsior!" grunted Terry Rourke.

Our hero said nothing, merely pressed his lips a little more tightly.

Then another packing case was laid open.

"Straw, bedad!" growled Terry.

Two more were opened. They contained nothing but hay.

Our hero now stepped back to the boxes that had been the base of the fire.

The flames now being out, he took a lantern and bent to examine them more carefully.

But one thing that attracted his attention particularly was the badly charred, almost destroyed remains of a box a little larger than an ordinary soap-box.

Inside of the charred pieces of this lay an old tin pan, not large nor very deep.

Drawing on his rubber gloves, since the tin was probably hot, Young Wide Awake picked up the tin and looked it over.

In the bottom a little liquid still remained.

"Hold out your hand, Hal," ordered our hero, then poured into his lieutenant's palm the few drops of liquid that remained in the tin pan.

"Gasoline, by George! No doubt about it, either!" ejaculated Hal.

"I thought so," muttered our hero. "What does this pan business make you think of, Hal?"

"Of the fire we had this morning at the house of Sam Shilden, the groggery man."

"And now we find the same thing in the cellar under Himple's store."

"What do you make of it, young gentlemen?" asked a quiet voice behind them.

They turned to look into the face of Belmont's little but very resolute police chief, Jason Sharp.

"What do I make of it?" repeated Young Wide Awake, drily. "We find here the evidence of the old game. A box that is placed near other inflammable material has placed in it an old tin pan. The pan is filled with gasoline. On the surface of the gasoline floats a cork, holding up a candle. The candle is lighted and left to burn its way down to the gasoline. In a place where there was more and better air the gasoline vapor would leap up and take flame from the candle at once. Down here it wouldn't. Besides, the candles that are made for this purpose have a very small wick that affords only a tiny blaze. That's all I make of it, chief. The rest belongs rather to the police."

"But you said you found something like this this morning in the basement of the tenement occupied by Sam Shilden, the saloon man."

"We found a pan. We didn't notice so much gasoline, however, for the oil was pretty well burned out."

Chief Jason Sharp looked thoughtful.

He could jump when he wanted, and good and hard, but he did not care about jumping at conclusions.

"Yes, I guess it belongs to the police—to do something," nodded Jason Sharp, reflectively.

"Arson, eh? Fire-bug?" asked Brad Thompson, eagerly, as he leaned forward.

"You fellows all keep quiet," warned Young Wide Awake. "Don't go to talking, either here or when you get up into the street."

At that, those who had pressed around drew back, all except Hal and Terry.

Chief Pelton had by this time arrived. He came slowly down the stairs, looking keenly around him.

"All out, eh, Young Wide Awake? You've hustled, as usual."

"But there seems to be a little something to this," muttered the chief of police.

Our hero reported to the fire chief what he had discovered.

"I was inclined to be suspicious this forenoon at the Shilden fire," went on Young Wide Awake. "Still, I had no proof. Now, however, it looks different. When we find circumstances just the same at two fires in the same day——"

"It's time to be suspicious about both fires," broke in Chief Pelton—in a guarded voice, however.

The young firemen followed the two chiefs up to the street.

Pelton, after whispering, "Keep me advised as to what you may do, Sharp," stepped into his buggy and drove away.

"Well, if that ain't like Pelton!" muttered Chief Sharp. "He doesn't like to make trouble for any one. So he asks me to keep him advised, and then scoots away without helping me to make trouble for some one."

"Can you make an arrest, anyway?" asked Young Wide Awake, as the two stood apart, talking in the lowest tones.

"Of course I can; but after that I've got to prove. I wouldn't want Himple suing me afterwards for false arrest."

"Himple didn't set fire to his own store, anyway," declared Young Wide Awake.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, if he did, he also set the blaze in Sam Shilden's basement. Now, Shilden, as we know, was at his saloon, and had been for a couple of hours, when the fire broke out."

"So——"

"And Himple, you will find, will be able to prove that he was a long way from here after closing-time this evening."

"Then——"

"If there has been arson, chief, then the same man set both fires. If the owners are responsible for the fires, then both hired the same man to do their dirty work for them. Shilden didn't have much of any furniture in his tenement. Himple's stock in the store, as we have seen, was very low. Yet, if you look it up, you will probably find that both men had big insurance policies. Had the fires been complete, they would have cashed in."

"Then what are we to do, Young Wide Awake?"

"Why, find the fellow that they both hired to set the fires."

"But how?"

"Well, if you want to take the chance, chief, you can arrest both Himple and Shilden. Then question them. Next frighten them into the belief that you have the fire-bug, who has confessed. If you can break their nerve, and if they are both guilty, then they'll soon tell you all they know about it, and after that you can grab the fire-bug."

"By thunder, I believe I will arrest them both—on suspicion," announced the chief.

"Quiet, then, for here comes John Himple."

"My, my, my! How near I came to losing my store!" cried Himple, a little, rather stout, bald-headed and cunning-eyed man of fifty.

"It's hard work to lose anything by fire, Himple," laughed Chief Sharp, "when there's such a fireman as Young Wide Awake handy. He had this fire under inside of five minutes."

Himple turned quickly upon our hero.

Young Wide Awake thought the first flash of that glance was anything but friendly.

Himple made that up, however, by grinning and holding out his hand.

"Young Wide Awake," he cried, "I don't know how to thank you. But you're a genius."

"This wasn't anything of a fire to put out," returned our hero, coolly. "Just a little stream—splash! it was gone."

Chief Sharp, who had stepped back to murmur a few words in the ear of the only policeman he had on the scene, now turned back again.

"Do what you can to close your store, Himple. Then go up to the station-house with this officer, and he'll take down the report of the fire, the amount of insurance, etc., for the regular police report."

For just an instant the fat little man gave the chief of police an uneasy look.

But Jason Sharp's tone and look were so bland and reassuring that Himple's fright vanished.

"All right, chief," he replied.

The Washingtons, in the meantime, under Hal's direction, were putting the apparatus in apple-pie order.

"I'll have to go down alone and get that fellow Shilden," confided Sharp to our hero. "And Shilden will put up a fight if he thinks he's under arrest."

"No one ever heard before that Chief Sharp was afraid of a fight," smiled Young Wide Awake.

"Nor am I, my young friend. But if I should happen to have to do some shooting I might like a witness for myself. The kind of a crew that hang out around Shilden's groggery would be likely to try to swear my life away if I had to do any shooting."

"I'll go with you," proposed Young Wide Awake, coolly.

"Will you?" demanded Chief Sharp, eagerly.

"And take as many more of the fellows as you would like, chief."

"Only one more, then. Too many would only advertise our business."

"Oh, Terry!" sang out Young Wide Awake, but in a tone which implied that it was no business out of the ordinary.

Terry came, and heard quietly.

"Me to help the officers, is it? In a tough place? Where there's a chance av a scrap or a shootin'? Shure, that's Oirish enuff to spell Terry Rourke!"

"Dump your helmet and rubber coat on the engine truck, then, and get on your cit. duds."

Our hero next ordered Hal to see to housing the apparatus on the return.

Himple, after fastening up the store, with the policeman's help, started cheerfully up the street with that officer.

Now Washington One had started to follow Hook and Ladder One up the street.

"Now we'll get Shilden, and the quicker the better," breathed Chief Sharp, setting the pace, while Young Wide Awake and Terry Rourke stepped in on either side of the chief.

They stopped for a moment in front of the lowest groggery in Belmont, a one-story little place of evil repute on a side street just off Main, at the water-front.

From inside came the sound of clinking glasses and the voice of an intoxicated man who was trying to sing.

Late as it was, there were at least thirty men in the place, and most of them hard-looking characters.

All in the saloon turned as Chief Sharp threw open the door and stepped briskly inside, followed by the two well-known young firemen.

The place reeked with the smell of rotten liquor and stale tobacco smoke.

Young Wide Awake, who hated the smell of liquor of any kind, felt himself almost gagging.

Shilden, a tall, powerfully built man, with a bloated face, small, sharp, black eyes, stood behind the bar, resting his big hands there for a moment.

At the lower end of the bar stood his helper, an undersized young fellow, who bore a tough reputation.

"Hullo, chief!" growled Shilden, when he saw who his visitor was.

"Good evening, Shilden. Full house, I see."

"Yes; but that ain't what brought ye here," growled Sam Shilden.

"No; a little matter of business."

Already some of the worst of the patrons of the place had edged away toward the further end of the room.

At least a dozen there believed that the chief might have come to arrest them.

"It isn't much, Shilden," the chief went on easily. "I just wanted to ask you to step up to the station-house to supply some facts about your fire at home this morning."

Shilden's face underwent a slight but quick change.

"I can't go with you to-night, chief," he replied.

"I'm sorry, but it will be necessary to have you go."

"What's that?" flared Sam Shilden. Then as suddenly stopped, his small eyes closely regarding Sharp's face.

"It's necessary for me to make up the report to-night," the chief went on coolly.

Sam Shilden leaned forward on his arms over the bar.

"Jason Sharp," he uttered, thickly, "I won't go with ye."

"Sam Shilden, you've made a mistake. You will go."

"I tell you I won't—not unless you arrest me."

"Oh, then I will arrest you," replied Sharp, as quietly as before.

"On what charge?" snarled Sam Shilden, fixing his now wholly uneasy eyes on the police official's face.

"Not exactly on a charge, Shilden—not yet. But upon suspicion, as it were."

"Suspicion of what?" roared the keeper of the groggery.

"A suspicion of arson."

The little chief's voice was as cool and quiet as if he were only talking of the weather.

"I'll not go with ye, Jason Sharp!"

"Then I'm sorry, but I'll have to take you by force, Shilden."

With an oath, and grabbing up a heavy bung-starter, Sam Shilden vaulted over the bar.

Raising the bung-starter, he towered over the little chief of police, staring down with an evil glare.

"Boys," roared Shilden, hoarsely, "are ye going to see this little toy cop try to make me go with him?"

"No, no!" came an ugly answer from the late drinkers.

"Then throw him out, and the fellers with him! Start in and make rough-house!"

There was a sullen growl from the little, ugly crowd.

Then, indeed, did they start to make rough-house!

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE BRINGS TWO CROOKS TO BOOK.

"Drop that bung-starter, Shilden, and put up your hands!"

Little Chief Sharp did not wince when he saw that trouble was starting in earnest.

Belmont's chief of police was one of those gritty men who never seek trouble, but who are always ready for it when it starts.

Young Wide Awake was standing at his right, Terry, snorting, at his left.

"I'll drop it!" roared Shilden. "On your head!"

He started to make good, but Young Wide Awake leaped upward, both his hands upraised.

Swift as Shilden's move had been, Young Wide Awake caught that descending arm, forcing it over to one side.

Shilden swung his heavy right arm for a crushing crack at our hero's head.

But Chief Sharp struck upward, with a blow that seemed to land all over Shilden's face at once.

With a roar the bully turned to pounce on the little chief.

As he did so he relaxed his hold a bit on the bung-starter.

Young Wide Awake wrenched it away.

"Where are you fellers, and what are ye doin'?" snarled Shilden.

That brought several of the toughs swarming to his rescue.

But Terry sailed past the groggery-keeper, hitting out right and left, and went into the center of the reinforcements.

Many a hard blow Terry took on his head and elsewhere, but fought on like a demon.

Yet there was hardly anger in Rourke's heart.

He was fighting because he loved to fight.

Sharp tripped the big fellow, and Young Wide Awake fell upon Shilden's breast, holding the bung-starter over the fellow's head.

"Sail into 'em, chief!" roared Young Wide Awake, awakening in earnest to the fracas now.

Then to Shilden he added warningly:

"You make a single move, you big bully, and you'll get this thing across the top of your head as hard as I can lay it on."

There was lightning in Young Wide Awake's eyes, thunder in his voice.

Shilden kept quiet for an instant, while wondering what to do next.

Beyond, Sharp and Terry were having a fight against overwhelming odds.

Then Shilden gave a sudden, cunning twist.

He meant to roll our hero off and get on top himself.

But Young Wide Awake was watching for that move.

Crack! He brought the bung-starter down with all the force he had threatened.

Shilden, with a sigh, was still.

"Surrinder, is it?" yelled Terry, who was now down,

borne to the floor by three toughs, while two more tried to get at him. "Surrinder? Niver, on yure loife!"

Young Wide Awake leaped up from senseless Shilden and jumped into the heart of the crowd around Terry.

Crack! thump! biff!

Lusty blows with that bung-starter made many a bone sore and aching.

Before those fierce blows the toughs fell back enough to permit of Terry's leaping to his feet.

"Thot's right, Wide. Sail into thim!"

And Terry was again in the thick of the fight, as was also Chief Sharp.

But it was Young Wide Awake, between them, within that clumsy but awe-inspiring mallet, who caused the greatest havoc and dread.

Disheartened, the toughs began to fall back toward the lower end of the room.

"Get your prisoner, chief," muttered our hero, as he and Terry halted, seeing no need to pursue into the tough crowd.

Sharp turned, and in a jiffy rolled his man and handcuffed him.

Then the chief stepped back to glare at the toughs.

"I see three men in the crowd that I want," announced Sharp. "I'll name them now. If they're in town to-morrow I'll run them in for six months apiece."

"Young Wider Wake," growled one tough who had not yet had enough, "ye're the biggest stiff of a fighter that ever came down Main Street. With that sledgehammer ye think ye can fight. Ye wouldn't dare tackle my small brother without ye had a weapon like that."

"You're a liar!" retorted Wide, promptly tossing the mallet over the bar, where it fell on the floor. "I'll fight you right now, and to a standstill."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Young Wide Awake," urged Chief Sharp.

"I've got to, chief," replied our hero, coolly. "I can't let any fellow like that call me just because I had to fight a crowd with a weapon."

"Oh, ye'll fight, will ye?" demanded the tough, coming forward.

He was a head taller than our hero and broader of shoulder. He looked far more than a match for the boy fire captain.

"Yes, I'll fight you," agreed Wide. "But not in this low groggery. Come out into the open air."

"And then get pinched by the chief, I suppose, after I've thumped you?" asked the tough, with sudden caution.

"I won't arrest you," said Sharp, "if Young Wide Awake challenges you."

"I do," repeated Wide. "This is a sickening sort of thing to have to fight with, but I won't stand for being told that I'm afraid to use my hands."

Through the whole fracas, even when it seemed as if one or more of the arresting party might be killed, Sharp had not drawn his revolver.

He hated to use one, and it was a rare occasion, indeed, on which he did pull a gun.

But the crowd believed that Sharp had his weapon with him, all right, and now that their leader lay on the floor, handcuffed and just beginning to come out of his daze, they wanted no more trouble with the police.

But the fight proposition caught them.

That seemed to promise some chance for a species of revenge.

If one of their number could thump one of the arresting party royally, and without dread of arrest, then the sight would be worth seeing.

So the crowd poured out, after having stood back long enough to enable Terry and the chief to force Shilden through the door.

"Now you fellows all stand over there, and keep your distance, without interfering, or there will be trouble," warned Sharp.

The now tamed though expectant crowd stood where ordered.

Young Wide Awake in the meantime had stripped off coat, vest and hat and had passed them to Terry.

The tough, too, had partly stripped, and now he stood eyeing our hero cunningly.

"Step out here," commanded Young Wide Awake, advancing. "We don't need any referee or any one to keep the time. Start in as quick as you like, and we'll keep at it to the finish."

"Or until I call a halt," interposed Sharp, grimly.

"Soak the kid two or three hard ones for me, Jake," begged Shilden, hoarsely.

"We'll see if he can do it," spoke Young Wide Awake, quietly.

"Lookout, then!"

With that Jake rushed in.

He was a crafty fighter, of the gutter type—that is to say, tricky.

He aimed a blow with either fist, in quick succession, for Young Wide Awake's face.

Both blows were feints—and Wide guessed it.

Then the tough's hands fell like a flash, as he tried to bump into Wide's wind.

But Wide was not there.

He side-stepped and came back with a left-hander that caught Jake on the side of a rather big nose.

The blow landed, sideways, with such force as to all but remove that nose from Jake's face.

Jake leaped back with a roar like that from an angry bull.

"You're doing well for the first off," jeered our hero. "Keep it up and you'll be all right."

That brought Jake's anger to the fore.

He leaped in again, but cautiously, sparring lightly and cunningly, and tried to provoke our hero into leading.

Yet that he could not do.

Wide, in fact, sparred so cautiously that Jake soon began to feel himself master of the spot.

Then, after feinting with his right, he suddenly let go with his left to land it on the tip of the young fireman's chin.

But Wide ducked under and came out at the side, landing on one of Jake's eyes with such ease that it did not seem like work.

Jake groaned and dropped his hands, that eye pained so.

Wide stood coolly waiting for the big fellow to get his nerve back again.

"What's the matter with ye, Jake?" growled Shilden. "Are ye becoming putty instead of iron. Can't ye see anything? Can't ye hit anything? Man, ye're a miss!"

Thus egged on, Jake came back into the mill. Yet he fought as if he had lost most of his nerve.

He sparred for half a minute without once trying to land.

Nor did Wide try to, either, contenting himself with keeping well enough out of the way of Jake's fist.

"Come on," jeered the young fireman. "Don't be afraid. I haven't got the mallet here. That wasn't what hit you."

Shilden swore at Jake.

Thus stung, Jake tried a final spurt of steam.

Just when he was not looking for it, though, a blow came on the side of Jake's jaw that sent him to the sidewalk.

"One, two, three—" counted the young fireman, and so on up to ten.

"He's out, all right," nodded our hero, coolly. "When Jake comes to he'll know that I can fight without a mallet."

He knelt beside the tough, feeling at his pulse.

"The pulse is going all right," continued Wide. "He isn't badly hurt, and his friends can look after him."

"Come along, then," urged Chief Sharp.

The three and their prisoner started toward Main Street, while a cowed crowd gathered up Jake and bore him back into the groggery.

Shilden, after the fight, had not a word to say.

He submitted sullenly to being led up the street, and within a few minutes was marched into the station-house.

A policeman came forward.

"Take this fellow down into a cell," ordered Chief Sharp, turning his prisoner over to the policeman.

"And see that he doesn't get a ghost of a chance to talk with the other prisoners," added Wide, meaningly.

As soon as Shilden was gone, Wide turned to the chief with:

"Now, wouldn't it be a good idea to have Himple brought in here?"

"All right, Wide, and you question him."

"It might scare the fellow more if you did the talking, chief."

"I'll put in a word when it's necessary," agreed Sharp.

As the policeman came back from locking up Shilden, he received the chief's order to bring in Himple.

The fat little storekeeper was very pale. He was worried-looking and haggard, while the look in his usually cunning eyes now kept shifting.

"Now, Mr. Himple," said Young Wide Awake, briskly,

"you might as well tell us what you know. Tell us all, for there's no use in concealing anything."

"But, for the love of heaven, what can I tell you about?" groaned the little man.

"Oh, you needn't bother telling us why you wanted your store burned," pursued Wide, taking out the pocket note-book in which he kept his own record of fires. "You wanted the store to be burned so that you could get more insurance than you were entitled to. We understand that, of course."

"Burn—my—store?" repeated Himple.

His tone and manner suggested that he was trying to show himself overcome by bewilderment.

"Come, come," smiled Wide. "It's terrible, of course. But you ought to have thought of that all before you went into the scheme to have your store burned."

"But I didn't! I didn't! I didn't, I tell you!" screamed Himple, looking with frightened eyes from one face to another.

"It's too late now to tell us that," went on Young Wide Awake, remorselessly. "The statement of the fellow you hired will be enough for us, since there is some other proof, too. The only thing to ask you is whether you have any statement that you wish to make before we confront you with the fellow you hired to do the job."

"But I didn't hire any one. I don't know anything about any job!" shrieked Himple, his face, under the influence of his great fright, looking like anything but human.

"Oh, very well; just as you please," nodded the young fireman. "We will read you your accomplice's statement about the matter; then we'll have him brought before you and you shall hear his statement."

"It's a lie—all a lie!" wailed Himple.

But Young Wide Awake, who was slowly turning the pages of his note-book, acted as if he did not hear.

"It's all here," went on the young fireman, "the whole story, just as told us by—what's the fellow's name?"

"Parks," suggested Himple, in a scared voice.

He had fallen right into the cleverly laid trap.

In a second more he realized it, too.

"I didn't say that!" he shrieked. "I don't know. I didn't say anything!"

But Young Wide Awake, looking sternly into the eyes of the affrighted prisoner, went on mercilessly:

"Himple, you might as well stop all nonsense. Your foolish denials can't fool any one, and they can't help you. They'll only hurt you. The more honest you are with us from this moment the safer it will be for you. Any attempt at denial or lies will only draw the rope more tightly around your neck."

"Arson isn't a hanging crime!" cried Himple, faltering and looking as if he would fall to the floor.

"Who told you so?" queried Wide, coldly. "Now, Himple, what first name did Parks give you? Your answer will show us whether you are dealing straight with us?"

"Gregg," faltered the wretched little man.

"Gregg Parks, eh? Gregg Parks?"

"I don't know his full name," faltered Himple. "I don't know anything but Gregg."

"Well, that stands for Gregory," went on Wide, coldly. "Now, Himple, tell us, without reserve, just how you came to go into this terrible business of setting fire to your store—setting fire by proxy, that is?"

Poor, scared little Himple, his nerve wholly gone now, broke down and told all he knew.

Some years before Gregg Parks had lived in Norwich, the town across the river from Belmont.

Trouble with the Norwich police had driven Gregg away to other localities, where he had taken up with the dangerous, wicked trade of fire-bug.

The fire-bug, when he follows his calling for a living, seeks out people who want to collect their fire insurance money, but who have not nerve enough to set their own fires.

The fire-bug starts a fire in a store or a home from which most of the insured property has been slyly removed.

For the fire-bug to be a success, his fires must be so well started that the building will be quickly burned to the ground.

Thus the insurance people are unable to prove that all of the insured stuff was not in the building at the time of the fire.

Incidentally, the owner who hires a fire-bug to do the work for him is always able to prove that he was a long distance from the fire at the time that it broke out.

The fire-bug must be a man of much cunning. When he goes to a new town he must be able to pick out, as by instinct, the people whom it will be safe to approach.

If he goes to one honest man, that honest man will inform the police about the rascal.

During the confession Young Wide Awake artfully drew out of Himple:

Gregg Parks was about five feet nine in height, weighing about one hundred and fifty pounds. His hair was dark and he wore a slight mustache. His clothes were poor, though not absolutely seedy. He wore a derby hat and sack suit, without overcoat.

Under Parks's left ear was a noticeable scar that he had received in some fight with knives.

His eyes were quick and alert, and his face not wholly bad to look at. He was a desperate rather than a sneaking fellow. He would undoubtedly kill his opponent if driven into a tight corner.

Chief Sharp wrote down the confession. Wide and Terry signed it as witnesses.

Then Himple, sobbing in a dazed way, was led off, his doom settled.

"Now let's have a try at Shilden," proposed our hero.

The big, defiant keeper of the groggery, still handcuffed, was led into the police station office.

Wide held up Himple's confession, also another document that might be some one's confession.

"As confessions are all the style this evening, Shilden," announced Wide, "we just wanted to see whether you cared

to add anything in that line. Here we have John Himple's confession, all made and signed, and here"—holding up the other paper—"we have Gregg Parks's."

"Parks!" stammered Shilden, his face going white. "Is he that white-livered? Did Gregg Parks——"

Here Shilden suddenly bethought himself and closed his mouth.

But he had gone too far, and he knew it.

Under clever questioning by Young Wide Awake, with a few artful questions thrown in by Chief Sharp, Shilden, though he did not break down, finally growled:

"Well, you gents seem to have got the goods on me, somehow."

"So you may as well tell us what we want to know," urged Wide.

After some urging, and swearing at a round rate, Shilden admitted that he had planned to make fifteen hundred dollars through burning his tenement. He had paid Gregg Parks the latter's price to undertake the job.

"But now that Gregg Parks has squealed on me," said Shilden, "I'll kill him at the first chance!"

"That'll be a long time away," observed Chief Sharp. "You won't either of you have any liberty for years to come."

"And to think ye star-rted it all on a guess and bluffed the whole game through!" exclaimed Terry Rourke, in wondering admiration, as the two young firemen left the police station behind. "Ye've shown yureself a wondher, Wide."

"A lot of fellows pass themselves off as wonderful who only keep their eyes open," laughed our hero, as he and Terry parted at a corner.

Wide walked briskly along, for it was in the early hours of morning, and he wanted as much sleep as he could get.

Just as he reached the last corner before home, Wide drew back with a gasp that was almost a yell.

For a man had darted out of the shadow and was holding a revolver aimed at the young fireman's belt-line.

And Wide knew the fellow in an instant from the description.

"Don't do anything foolish, Parks," he advised quietly, though his face was white and his voice none too steady.

"It's you who did something foolish," growled the fire-bug. "You got two people jugged to-night and butted into my business. Do you s'pose they'll guess why it happened when they find you lying here dead in the morning?"

"No!" shouted Young Wide Awake, suddenly leaping to one side, then closing in and gripping the pistol wrist.

Fighting with despair, he wrenched the revolver away.

Yet, intent on getting that pistol, Wide forgot another point.

Flop! Gregg Parks tripped the young fireman.

Then, not waiting to try to get the pistol, the fire-bug took wise refuge in flight.

Wide was up within two or three seconds.

But the fire-bug, having gotten that much of a start, darted down an alleyway.

By the time that Wide got in there, and to the end of the alleyway, the fire-bug had vanished.

For some ten minutes the young fireman hunted, but in vain.

"All I've got is a souvenir," he smiled, glancing down at the revolver in his hand.

Going now straight home, Wide called up Chief Sharp over the fire department telephone and stated what had happened.

"And now (yawn) me for (gape) bed," murmured Young Wide Awake, stretching. "I feel (gape) as if I hadn't been there for (yawn) a month."

CHAPTER III.

A PLOT GOES WRONG.

"'Tis quare that the police can't find Gregg Parks," mused Terry Rourke. "Especially whin the whole town of Belmont has been aroused an' presinted wid the description av the scoundhrel."

"Queer!" retorted Wide. "Not at all. Parks has left town—left town in the hours of darkness after the failure of his attempt to do me."

"Thin ye're sure he's left town?" demanded Terry.

"Sure? Of course not. But it looks reasonable to suppose that Parks would skip town when he had nothing but capture to gain by staying here."

The chums were at Wide's home, the next afternoon, after school.

Wide's mother, Mrs. Halstead, being away daytimes at her typewriting office on Main Street, the young firemen had the house to themselves.

"Oi'll be almost sorry av the fire-bug has left town," muttered Terry.

"You will?" echoed Wide. "Not I, though. I've no notion for being called out at all hours to fires that ought not to be burning."

Jingle! The telephone was ringing.

"That you, Richard Halstead?" demanded a voice that our hero at once recognized.

The speaker at the other end of the wire was John Lester, the wealthiest man in Belmont, who lived in a handsome place just out past the town proper.

Moreover, John Lester was the father of bright, merry, lovely Kitty Lester, who had given Young Wide Awake his coveted opportunity to win his spurs as her sweetheart.

"Yes, this is I, Mr. Lester," answered our hero.

"Can you hear me plainly?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've got some strange news for you, lad."

"Nothing wrong, sir, I hope?" asked Wide, concern quickly appearing in his face, for he feared for bad news of Kitty—an accident or something like that.

"Rather wrong, I'm afraid," came the dry answer. "I've just received a threatening letter from a scoundrel who signs himself 'Fire-bug.'"

"The deuce you have?" gasped Young Wide Awake, then quickly added:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but the news startled me."

"Naturally, my boy. Just as the letter was expected to startle me," replied Mr. Lester.

"May I ask with what 'Fire-bug' threatened you?"

"He demands that I meet him at a named spot to-night and bring with me five thousand dollars."

"What's that?" cried Young Wide Awake, sharply.

"Five thousand dollars," repeated Mr. Lester, drily.

"More than that, he warns me that if I report the matter to the police I will be trailed and assassinated. He writes as if he were a desperate character, doesn't he?"

"This fire-bug is a desperate character," uttered Young Wide Awake, something rising in his throat that made his voice sound hoarse.

"But is he desperate enough to carry out his threat of assassination?" asked Mr. Lester.

It sounded as though something were wrong with his voice, too.

"I believe, Mr. Lester, that the fellow will carry out his threat if he gets a chance to do it."

Then our hero told, as briefly as he could, what he knew about Gregg Parks.

"What to do I don't exactly know," said Mr. Lester. "I guess I'd better go to the police."

"No, sir, for then you will surely be a marked man. There's no use in bringing sure trouble down on your head."

"What, then? Have you a better suggestion?"

"The bank is still open, sir. Go there and draw the five thousand dollars."

"What's that, Young Wide Awake?" demanded Mr. Lester, startled, for he had thought our hero made of sterner stuff.

"Now, Mr. Lester," objected Young Wide Awake, "who said a word about paying the money?"

"Oh! Then go on, please. Let me hear your plan."

"Here's what I'd do. You have a big, strong safe at home. Take the money straight home with you and lock it up. To-night, carry the same satchel to the place of meeting named by 'Fire-bug.'"

"With the money in it?"

"With the money in the safe at home," rejoined Wide, "if you like my idea. Go alone to the place of meeting, Mr. Lester. By the way, where is the place of meeting?"

"Under the three big elms in front of Ford's place."

"Don't be at all nervous about going there, Mr. Lester. We'll be hidden there, waiting to jump on Mr. Fire-bug. We'll turn him over to the police, who'll head him for State's prison."

"That's your plan, Halstead?"

"Yes, sir," returned Young Wide Awake. "And I hope you'll follow it."

"Be very sure that I shall, then, for it is good common sense."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, sir. And don't be afraid to depend on our being there to help you through."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that. Very good, then. I shall be under Ford's elms at eight-thirty, the time appointed."

"And don't go near the police station."

"I won't, as that would give the plan away."

"Don't even talk to a policeman while in town. Don't talk to any one outside of the bank, for that matter. Look as worried as you can, Mr. Lester, and grip the satchel all the time as if it were something precious."

"I see through your plan, my boy. It's a good one, too! Well, then, I shall depend on you."

"You won't be sorry, sir."

"Good-bye, Halstead."

Terry Rourke, who had been standing close to the telephone, had heard every word.

"Well, av all the adventures!" glowed the Irish boy.

"Think we can handle it?" smiled Wide.

"Do Oi think a duck can swim?" demanded Terry. "But we'll have th' foine toime jumpin' Mr. Fire-bug. Oi feel loike laughing, as the Oirishman did whin he stood looking into the field and thinking how he'd take the bull be the horns and toss Mr. Bull about."

"Don't," grimaced Young Wide Awake. "You know, that Irishman went into the field, after he'd had his laugh, and tried to throw the bull about. But the bull threw him over the fence instead. Then the Irishman felt glad only because he had had his laugh first, anyway. This mustn't be any bull to-night."

"It won't be," declared Terry, soberly. "It can't be."

At precisely thirty minutes after eight o'clock, John Lester, carrying a small satchel, walked down the road.

He halted under Ford's elms, wiped his brow, as if the excitement made him perspire freely, and looked about.

He was the only person visible on the scene.

"I suppose I've got to show myself here a little while before I'll be called upon," murmured the old man.

He walked slowly back and forth for five minutes.

Then the sound of an approaching wagon reached him.

The horse came onward at a slow trot, with only one person visible on the front seat of a covered wagon.

As the vehicle got nearer Mr. Lester halted in his walk and stood looking at it.

"John Lester?" called the man, in a low voice, reining up.

"Yes. Are you looking for me?"

For answer the man dropped the reins, next leaping lightly to the ground.

He came slowly forward, peering into the old man's face.

"I wrote you a letter, Mr. Lester, that you must have received."

"What was in the letter?" demanded Mr. Lester, as if he wished to be cautious.

"I asked you to bring five thousand dollars here, and signed myself 'Fire-bug.'"

"Oh, you did?" demanded Young Wide Awake, leaping up from the other side of the wall and vaulting over, club in hand.

Terry sprang at the same instant, the two young firemen darting at the wretch on either side.

"Treachery!" snarled Parks, reaching for his hip-pocket.

But Terry struck him a blow on the right arm that made the fire-bug cry out with pain.

"Hold on!" he muttered hoarsely. "I surrender!"

He held up his hands, and Young Wide Awake stepped forward, taking a revolver from the fellow's hip-pocket.

Terry looked on with tremendous interest. So did John Lester.

Thus it happened that none of the trio of captors saw two men crawl stealthily out at the back of the wagon and creep forward, each with a bludgeon in his hand.

Crack! Young Wide Awake went down to the ground, senseless from a blow struck from the rear.

Terry toppled over in the same instant as badly done for.

Parks, thus reinforced by his pals, turned to the startled Mr. Lester with a sneering grin.

"Your plot didn't work, Mr. Lester," he jeered. "Now, since you've tricked us in one thing, probably you have in another. You have brought no money in that satchel. If that proves to be the case we shall wind up your life for you, sir, on the instant!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE PLOT THAT WORKED.

John Lester had uttered a cry of dazed despair when he saw the two young firemen struck down beside him.

Yet, now that he was himself threatened, he did not lose either his wits or his courage.

"You fellows are mad," he uttered contemptuously, glaring at the three crooks.

"You're right," clicked Parks. "We are mad—and we're going to prove it."

"Have you stopped to think what murdering me would mean?"

"What?"

"Well, do you understand that I am a very wealthy man?"

"We haven't seen any of your money yet," growled Parks, at which grim jest his two pals swore.

"But plenty of my money will be used if you fellows kill me," warned Lester. "My family will place a fortune at the disposal of the biggest detective agencies in this country. You fellows will be hunted from town to town until you are caught and punished. Have you any idea what money can accomplish in punishing scoundrels like you?"

"Oh, your family will be busy enough in taking care of itself against us," sneered Parks.

"But——"

"Shut up!"

Then Parks turned to his pals, who still gripped their bludgeons.

"Jump on him and soak him!" ordered the fire-bug,

hoarsely. "Pound his head to a jelly. Then, after that, make sure of these two kids. Quick, now!"

Parks made his own move in the terrible game by leaping upon John Lester and pinning his arms to his side.

"Now, hit him quick!"

"Don't you do it!" uttered Hal Norton's voice. "Stand where you are, and get your hands up as quick as the good Lord will let you!"

Hal stood beside the stone wall, while Joe Darrell stood beside him.

Both youngsters held double-barreled shotguns, ready for instant use.

They had been stationed a little further up the road.

Realizing the laying-low of Young Wide Awake and Terry Rourke, they had been cautiously, stealthily working their way to the spot on their hands and knees.

"Yes, up with your hands!" growled Joe. "If you don't—well, I feel just like filling a rascal's head full of buck-shot!"

Parks sprang backward a dozen feet, dragging John Lester with him, that the old man's body might serve as a shield.

The fire-bug's two pals broke and ran at once, moving in zig-zag fashion to lessen the danger of being hit.

"Stop," yelled Hal, "or we fire!"

Bang! Joe fired without further warning.

But, as a shotgun is effective at not more than forty yards, and as the fellows had leaped into their sprint at the first sign of trouble, Joe's shot brought down no one.

Bang! Hal fired promptly, but with no better result.

Each fired his second barrel promptly, but of course failed to hit, as the distance was too great.

"Reload," ordered Hal, "and chase."

Slipping fresh shells into their guns, the young firemen started off in pursuit.

It was useless, though, as they soon discovered.

For the three scoundrels, besides having a good start for such a dark night, went in three different directions.

Young Wide Awake stirred at the crashing noise of the guns.

"What's up?" he asked, wonderingly.

"You are—thank Heaven!" cried John Lester, and, giving his arm to the young fire captain, helped him to his feet.

"I got the worst of that, didn't I?" demanded Wide, ruefully.

"Rather," nodded Mr. Lester. "Yet let us be thankful that it was no worse. Your friends with the guns are off now in full chase. I'm praying that they may get the scoundrels."

"To get 'em with the gun would be better than making prisoners," muttered Young Wide Awake, vengefully.

"Then you knew there was more than one?" queried Mr. Lester, eagerly.

"I guessed there was another, for I heard steps. But the blow on my head came before I had time to dodge or turn."

"There were two more of them," corrected John Lester.

Two more av thim?" demanded Terry Rourke, who had just opened his eyes. "Thin, bedad, Oi understand how it was Oi got me crack, too!"

"Terry," said Wide, glumly, as he bent over his chum, "I told you it was a bad plan to have your laugh beforehand. We've lost the game."

"Here come your friends back—and no one else with them," announced John Lester.

"They dodged us in the darkness," growled Joe. "'Twas no use going further looking for them. We were afraid they might double and work back on you."

"There's the pistol I took from Parks," grunted Wide, bending over and picking up the weapon.

"Kape it," advised Terry, earnestly. "Maybe ye'll have the chanst t' use it on him yet."

The wagon in which Parks and his pals had reached the spot still stood there.

"Some rig they stole from some one," said Wide, moodily.

"We'll take it to my stable," suggested John Lester, "and then telephone the police to come and get it."

"I'll drive you home, Mr. Lester," proposed Wide, with a grim smile.

He helped the old gentleman up to the seat and picked up the reins.

Terry got in at the rear of the wagon, while Hal and Joe walked on just ahead, keeping their eyes open for any further trouble that might show up.

"We will call the police to the house now," suggested Mr. Lester, in a low tone.

"I wouldn't," suggested Wide. "The fellows probably will be hiding close enough to your house to know it when the police show up."

"But what harm will it do to have them know that the police have come?"

"Just this harm," hinted our hero. "Since Parks has pals, which we didn't know before, he undoubtedly had one of them in the bank this afternoon."

"True enough," muttered John Lester. "Now I think of it, I am sure that one of that pair was in the bank this afternoon when I drew the money."

"Of course," nodded Young Wide Awake. "And now they know, as well as you or I do, that you have five thousand dollars in your house—in the big safe, most likely. Mr. Lester, those fellows are desperate enough for anything."

"I believe that now, my dear boy."

"Therefore, unless the gang finds that the police are at the house, they will undoubtedly try to break into your house to-night. Very likely their plan is to wake you up at the muzzles of guns and compel you to go downstairs and open the safe for them."

"Then sending for the police will scare them off, if they should be watching my house."

"And also, Mr. Lester, it would destroy our last chance of catching the desperadoes. Now, why not let them come?"

You have your chauffeur and men-servants, who can reinforce us. You have weapons at the house. We shall have a formidable party for their capture."

"If they try to break into the house, that will be, I suppose, our only hope of effecting their capture," replied Mr. Lester, thoughtfully.

"They must be captured, sir," urged Wide. "Until those rascals are behind the bars your life will never be safe. Neither will that of the members of your family."

"I think you are right about that," nodded Lester, thoughtfully. "When they suspected that I didn't have any money in the satchel to-night they had seized me to kill me. Your young friends ahead appeared just in time to stop that."

"Then you agree to my plan, Mr. Lester?" pressed Wide.

"Most heartily. If the scoundrels come to-night we will have every preparation made to give them a warm time of it."

Young Wide Awake tingled, for this was just the kind of talk he loved to hear.

"Don't let the girls know that we have come," urged our hero, though his heart sank at the prospect of not meeting Kitty. "You can get us quietly up to Ted's room until later in the night."

"Yes; though only Heaven knows whether that young urchin is at home to-night," uttered Mr. Lester. "Still, as the lad never gets into bad company, I don't refuse him permission to go out evenings."

They reached the house, and Mr. Lester let the boys in to go quietly up to Master Ted's room, while Mr. Lester called a stableman to take charge of the horse and wagon.

"Hello, you fellows!" was Ted's eager greeting. "But what makes you look so funny? And why are you carrying those guns?"

"Keep quiet, youngster, and let us in without rousing the town," whispered Young Wide Awake.

Then they told the youngster, at which Master Ted was royally glad that he had remained at home this evening.

At eleven o'clock all except the regular night lights were out in the Lester house.

Down in the library, where Mr. Lester's big safe stood, Mr. Lester and his chauffeur, Adams, were present, with the five members of Washington One.

Mr. Lester's men-servants, all armed, were stationed where it was believed they could do the most good.

All was dark in the library, and Mr. Lester, in grim hospitality, had left two of the library windows unfastened, in order to make it easier for Gregg Parks and his pals to get in, should they choose to come.

The minutes dragged slowly with people who wanted so much to happen.

Down below in Belmont the big public clock struck the hour of midnight.

After another age of waiting the clocks recorded the hour of one.

Then, after what seemed an all night of waiting, came two o'clock.

Young Wide Awake, who began to despair of seeing the crooks this night, felt of the lump on his head to assure himself that it was not a dream.

Click! It came suddenly—something touching at one of the windows.

The watchers thrilled, then stiffened, on the alert.

They could dimly make out two heads at one of the windows.

Then the window began to rise softly.

A man came in at the open window, then turned to help his pal in.

"All quiet enough in the house," muttered one of the pair, in a very low tone.

"Too quiet," grumbled the other. "We'll be heard going up the stairs."

"No danger. Sleeping people don't wake as easily as that. Here's the safe. What a big affair."

"Oh, old Lester will open it quickly enough when we wake him up with a gun at his head."

"Don't stop to talk," called in Gregg Parks's whispering voice, as the fire-bug looked in at the window. "Get up stairs on your business."

"No need to!" rumbled Young Wide Awake's heaviest, deepest voice. "Throw your hands up, you fellows. We see you and you can't see us. This means a killing if you balk."

Crack! A shot rang out, for Mr. Lester, seeing Parks, outside, start to bolt, fired straight after him.

But the shot must have missed, for, in that awed silence of Parks's trapped pals, they could hear the fugitive's still running steps.

Then other shots rang outside, for Mr. Lester had men posted there in hiding.

One of the scoundrels trapped in the library had promptly put up his hands.

But the other reached for his revolver.

Young Wide Awake, who was nearest to him, saw the move, and leaped forward, holding a pistol against the fellow's stomach.

"Don't try for a weapon, or you're a dead one!" rang the young fire captain's voice. "Up with your hands, or I won't wait a second about blowing the middle out of you!"

Then that crook's hands went up, too, and he stood there trembling, for the bravest man flinches at thought of a bullet tearing through him.

"Take this fellow," commanded our hero, turning to Joe. "I want to get outside to see what they've done with Gregg Parks."

"They're coming now," called Ted from the open window. "They are bearing a wounded man with them. Oh, pshaw! It's Hickey, the stableman!"

"The scoundrel got away from us, sir," called out Mr. Lester's gardener. "Hickey was nearest to him and tried to stop him, but got a bullet for his trouble."

"Is Hickey badly hurt?" demanded Mr. Lester, anxiously.

"Nothing but a little hole in the leg, that'll be all right soon, sir," called Hickey.

"We got two out of three, but not the fellow we wanted most," grumbled Young Wide Awake.

The two that had been captured were now bound securely and guarded vigilantly, while Mr. Lester telephoned for a doctor to come and attend Hickey, and for the police to come and attend to the prisoners.

In the meantime, Mr. and Mrs. Vane, and Faith, and Mrs. Lester and Kitty, aroused by the shots, had dressed and come scurrying down the stairs.

"Well, of all the strange surprise parties!" gasped Kitty, staring at the armed men and boys.

"It didn't work quite as well as we could have wanted, Miss Kitty," replied Young Wide Awake. "We have two guests, but the third and most highly valued got away."

"What on earth can you be talking about?" demanded Faith, staring in amazement.

"O'i'll take pleasure in tellin' ye the whole story, Miss Faith," volunteered Terry. "Will ye be pleased to take a seat wid me at wan side, thot we may not disturb the talkin' av the rest av the people at this party?"

"It looks more like a tragedy than a party," shuddered Kitty.

"Yes, it was. Hickey has been shot, though not badly."

"Shot?" gasped the girl, again staring at the weapons.

"I guess we'd better follow the example of Terry and Faith," suggested Young Wide Awake, passing his arm under the girl's and drawing her to one side.

Doctor and police came and attended to their several duties.

When the prisoners had been taken away, and Hickey had been put to bed, Mr. Lester came into the reception-room, where he found Wide and Terry and their sweethearts.

"Do you young ladies understand it all now?" asked Mr. Lester, drily.

"But, papa! Never to have told us a thing about it in advance!" pouted Kitty.

"Now, what good could you have done had you known?" laughed her father.

"But we would have been so interested," protested Miss Kitty.

"And would have lost your night's rest, child. As it is, you've gotten half of it. Now you can go back and get the remainder of it as soon as the young men go."

"Had we better go and leave the house to-night?" asked our hero.

"Why not?" John Lester wanted to know. "I shall have my own men around the house, watching. And they've only one scared fire-bug to watch against."

So the young men took their leave, though not until Mr. Lester had declared his gratitude to them in unmistakable terms.

"You'll have the house guarded day and night for the

present, won't you, sir?" urged Young Wide Awake. "I fear danger, if you don't."

"To-morrow," replied Mr. Lester, "I shall have private detectives here to watch over us. They'll remain until that fire-bug is caught or chased out of the country."

By morning Belmont was excited from one end to the other.

Almost every citizen was aiding the police by keeping an eye open for a possible glimpse at that now lone fire-bug, Gregg Parks.

CHAPTER V.

THE BUCKET BRIGADE'S DESPERATE VENTURE.

Clang!

"Washington One!" bellowed Young Wide Awake from the gateway of the High School grounds.

It was at all but the end of the forenoon recess when the fire alarm commenced to toll in.

In a twinkling the young firemen had turned and were sprinting out of the yard.

Before the running young firemen had reached Main Street they had counted the alarm.

It came in from a new section, known as "The Hill," to the northward of Belmont.

In record time the youngsters had their engine and hose cart out and went tearing northward.

"It'll be a stubborn fire, up there on the hill, if it once gets well away from us," muttered Wide to Hal, who ran at his side.

"Why?" asked Hal.

"Poor water pressure—the hill is so high."

"Poor pressure—or none at all," grunted Hal.

As they raced clear of the town they saw the fire itself.

The smoke was coming, in rather a thin stream as yet, from two windows on the uppermost floor of a four-story house.

"Oh, of course it had to be some house like Allen's, and at the top," grunted Hal.

"It means no water on that top floor," declared Wide.

"So—what?"

"The buckets, of course."

"They'll be a sorry lot of use by the time we get there," quivered Hal, for already they could see that the cloud of smoke from the upper Allen windows was increasing in volume.

"Buckets have got to win!" uttered Young Wide Awake, doggedly. "We can't lose a fine, costly home like that. It would disgrace us."

Then, falling back along the line, our hero shouted:

"Fellows, we've got to form the brigade and make a bucket fight up yonder. Don't any of you feel that you can't do it. We've simply got to do it!"

They were darting up the hill now, panting a little from the run and from the hard work of hauling the machines over the up-grade.

Yet without slackening speed they turned at the gate and ran into the Allen grounds.

Mr. Allen, busy superintending the work of his family and servants in removing furniture from the ground floor, stopped long enough to run to meet Young Wide Awake as the two machines were stopped beside a private hydrant.

"You've got a tough job here, Young Wide Awake," panted the owner.

"I know it, but we're going to win, if it's possible. Unreel that hose—lively there! One length will do!"

"One length?" gasped Mr. Allen, a middle-aged, rather portly man.

"Yes—enough for our purposes," clicked Young Wide Awake.

The length was unreeled and coupled by the time that Hook and Ladder One, led by Tom Scott, turned into the yard.

"Off with the buckets now!" shouted Young Wide Awake.

Then, to Scott:

"You're just in time, captain. Off with a ladder that will reach to that window up there."

Scott and his men rattled off the ladder, raising it with some help from the Washingtons.

"Captain Scott, your men can just as well get into the line, too," ordered Young Wide Awake. Hal, you see that the line is formed right. Terry—along with me."

Young Wide Awake was already mounting the ladder swiftly.

Terry sprang after him, and Ted Lester, too.

Through the window these three leaped.

"Come on, Brad—you and Slam Bang. The rest stay outside on the line."

Young Wide Awake had taken but a flying glance at the flames raging in the room before he turned to see that the bucket line formed swiftly and capably.

There were sixteen young firemen on the ladder—all it would hold.

They were so close together that they could pass buckets without any high-reaching.

"Juggle those buckets along now! Joe, keep the pumping going. Hal, fill and start the buckets yourself. Remember, fellows, that every drop splashed out of a bucket is one drop less to fight the fire with. Steady, now!"

Terry was at Young Wide Awake's elbow as our hero turned back.

"A bucket at a toime won't be doing much here," gritted Rourke.

"Exactly; you and I will each empty a bucket at the same time, at the same spot. Stick close to me, old fellow!"

The wall separating this room from the next was crackling with the intense heat, seething with the flames which leaped forward.

The two connecting walls and the floor near the back wall were well ablaze, too.

Owing to the dryness of the burning material the smoke was not as dense as might have been expected, yet there

was smoke enough to set the young firemen to sputtering and coughing.

Ted Lester, having nothing to do for the moment, made his way to another window to get air.

"Here, shut that window! Don't feed air to the flames!" rang Young Wide Awake's voice, sharply.

A yell outside, and the first buckets of water were arriving.

Young Wide Awake seized one, Terry another.

"Now, together!"

They swung, throwing the water true. It went against the back wall, drenching it for a moment.

Then the water went up in steam.

But the two young firemen, after tossing their buckets through the open window, clear of the heads of the passers, seized two more and darted back.

Working together, they were able to deliver twenty buckets of water or more to the minute.

Young Wide Awake was soon able to see that the fire at the back wall was being checked.

"Now for the side wall at the left!" he shouted.

For a full minute and a half they dashed on water here, then turned to the side wall at the left.

"Ar-re we doing much?" shouted Terry.

"As much as possible. We're slowly getting the better of the flames. It isn't spreading any more—this fire."

This Wide jerked out while busily engaged in dashing on more water.

It was the fastest work that he and Terry had done in many a day.

Ted Lester had stood by, prepared to handle buckets if there should be need of him.

But, though the line on the ladder was passing buckets as fast as they could be filled from the hose, Young Wide Awake and his chums were handling the buckets as fast as they came.

"Why not take the hose off the hydrant and get the water direct?" grunted Terry, as they toiled.

"Water pressure isn't heavy enough to make any difference," replied Wide, between splashes. "Besides, with the hose, we save losing or slopping any water."

"Can you hear me?" Hal bellowed up, as our hero appeared at the window.

"Yes. What is the matter?"

"Floor underneath you is catching. You'd better come down."

"Not until we get the flames stopped up here. Pass ahead."

Again the buckets came flying, and again Wide and Terry dashed the water on the flames.

Out of the window Wide had caught side of his enemy and rival, Fred Parsons, who had just come up with the Protective company that he commanded.

The Protectives were now busy saving furniture from the parlor floor.

"We've got the fire about out down here," chuckled Terry, three minutes later.

They had drenched all of the woodwork so thoroughly that, though the fire still sputtered and smoldered, the walls would no longer ignite and break out in fresh places.

"A few more buckets here, Terry, and we can give our attention to the floor below."

"The flure's getting hot be this toime," grunted the Irish lad.

Underneath them they could hear lusty blows with axes.

Evidently Scott's hook and ladder men had borrowed axes from Washington and were at work down there.

"There!" muttered Young Wide Awake, pausing, bucket in hand. "I reckon we've done for the flames on this floor, Terry."

"Then, for the love av Heaven, let us get out av here," proposed Rourke, earnestly. "Be the feeling, me shoes are bur-rning off with the fire that's in the flure."

"Come on!"

They turned, starting side by side for the window.

Cr-r-rash! Just under their flying feet the floor gave way with a tearing, splintering sound.

Wildly the young firemen caught at the hot timbers around them.

But everything was yielding and giving in that doomed flooring.

With two distinct yells they fell through, pitching to the floor below.

Young Wide Awake fell on his side, but saved himself serious injury.

Terry came down on his knees, and groaned a bit.

"Glory be! 'Tis a volcano falling on us!" roared Rourke, while Tom Scott and his men darted forward to raise them.

Fiery showers were certainly falling around them from the destroyed, caving flooring.

But the young firemen had performed the excellent service of bringing down with them in their fall all of that part of the flooring that had caught fire.

Coughing, patting out smoking, smoldering places in the boys' clothing, the hook and ladder men dragged them to safety.

"Thank you, men," said Wide, politely. "We didn't mean to butt in on your work in that fashion. We couldn't help it."

"You did the best thing you could do for us," grinned Tom. "We were having hard work reaching that blazing ceiling."

Terry had limped to the window, shouting:

"Captain orders you to get a shorter ladder and form the line to this window instead. Lively now!"

"Where's Ted?" demanded our hero, darting forward, though he went a bit lamely.

"Got down the ladder," explained Terry, briefly. "He wasn't fool enough to stay in a room with the floor going."

The line, re-formed, passed water to this lower floor.

Ten minutes more saw a costly home saved, with a loss of but a few hundreds of dollars.

Chief Pelton, who had sprung up the stairs in time to

see the finish of the work, laid a heavy hand on our hero's shoulder.

"Quick, splendid work, Young Wide Awake!"

"Hard, but not difficult to think out, chief," answered the young fire captain.

"I didn't know your fellows had had drill with the fire buckets."

"We have, though, chief."

"So I knew when I saw the splendid discipline of the passers."

"That's what we thought the buckets were for, chief," explained Young Wide Awake, innocently.

A dripping, smoke-smelling lot of firemen, both boys and grown-ups, descended the stairs to the yard.

"Hustle, now, and get everything out of the parlor floor," shouted Fred Parsons, loudly.

He was standing by, lifting not a finger, but exhorting his eight boys of the Protective crew to harder work.

"Is it safe to go up to the second floor, chief?" queried Fred, as our friends came down.

Chief Pelton, not hearing, had turned away without answering.

"I guess you'll find it safe enough, Captain Parsons," returned Wide, smiling. "The chief has declared the fire out."

"Then what are we packing all this truck out for, and sweating like horses?" demanded Larry Downes, one of the Protectives, gruffly.

Young Wide Awake laughed.

"Exercise won't hurt any of you Protectives, I guess," he shot back over his shoulder.

Fred Parsons turned to look blackly after his rival, the young fire captain.

"Now, what does he mean by saying that?" gruffed Fred.

CHAPTER VI.

TED SHOWS MORE SPUNK THAN JUDGMENT.

"What's the matter?" demanded Larry, in a low tone. "Wide getting fresh?"

"Does he ever get anything else?" leered Parsons.

"What's he saying this time?"

"He said exercise wouldn't hurt us."

"Confound him!"

"I've a good mind to call him down—hard!" growled Fred, who hated Young Wide Awake, above all, for having beaten him in the race for Kitty Lester's favor.

"It'd be all right to call him down," growled Larry.

"But how?"

"Aye, there's the rub!"

Wide, so far, had shown a complete ability to turn the tables on his haters among the members of Protective One.

"Curse him!" uttered Fred, clenching his fists.

"That's the easiest thing to do—and the safest, too," uttered a dry, piping voice behind them.

Fred turned with a start, to find himself looking down

into the grinning, mischievous face of Ted Lester, who was Kitty's cousin.

Fred, who hoped to win his way back into Kitty's favor, did not want any trouble with the impish little cousin.

"Oh, hullo, Ted!" greeted Fred, with a sheepish grin.

Then he and Downes hurried away.

"Huh!" remarked Master Ted.

No public attempt was made to "call down" Young Wide Awake, who, now that his duty was done, was superintending the "trimming up" of the Washington One apparatus for its return to the engine house.

There were no more alarms through the daytime, though Wide and Terry, who had reported to Chief Pelton as soon as they found chance, that they had smelled gasoline on first reaching that upper floor, caused a good deal of excitement in Belmont.

Again a determined hunt for the fire-bug started.

Allen, the owner of the burned premises was a man so wealthy that he was past any suspicion of having set the fire himself.

"Who, then, but the fire-bug would have done such a thing?"

The town seemed to sit on nettles.

People who thought they smelled smoke or heard a crackling noise thought at once of Gregg Parks, the hated, dreaded, fiendish fire-bug.

Had Parks been caught on Main Street that day he would have been lynched ere the police could have gotten out for his protection.

The excitement was felt in the town that night.

Hundreds of people were on the streets—though some members of every family was left at home to look out for fire.

"What are the police doing?" was a question heard on every side.

But the question that tormented the police was:

"What on earth can Parks be doing? Where is he hiding that we can't find him? And how does the scoundrel manage to get about from place to place without being seen and caught?"

Ted Lester was abroad that night, as he often was, in search of any excitement that might turn up.

Yet, tiring of all the fire-bug talk that he heard on Main Street, he cut across, at last, into Ellis Street for a bit of relief from the topic that seemed to be on every one else's tongue.

So, as it happened, he ran into Fred Parsons and Larry Downes, on their way to the house of Protective One.

"Oh, hullo, Ted!" was Fred's friendly greeting.

"Hullo to yourself," replied Ted, without enthusiasm.

"Where have you been keeping yourself lately, youngster?" asked Fred, in what was meant to be a friendly tone.

"In good company, mostly," replied Ted, coolly.

"You always did, didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. But I find that I'm getting more particular every day."

And Ted started to edge off, with a meaning that was altogether too plain.

"Oh, don't let us say sharp things to each other, Ted," wheedled Fred, who was angry inside, nevertheless. "You and I used to be good friends, once in a while."

"Yes," admitted Ted, in a tone of mock regret. "I suppose I haven't always been as careful about my company as I should have been."

"Fresh little imp!" muttered Larry Downes, in a low voice.

But Fred gripped his friends' arm—a sign for peace.

"How's Kit, Ted?" asked Fred.

"Why don't you go up and ask her?" challenged Ted Lester.

"Why, that would be a good idea," Fred replied, brightening.

"Huh! Just try it!"

"What do you mean, Ted?"

"You go up and ring our front-door bell, and——"

Ted paused wickedly.

"Well?" persisted young Parson, rashly.

"The front door'll hit you in the face," replied Ted, serenely.

Larry grinned, in spite of himself, but Fred darkened.

"See here, Ted, what do you mean?" he demanded, a little more harshly.

"Go up and ring the bell—that's all," retorted Ted.

"Do you think your cousin wouldn't welcome me, Ted?"

"My cousin hasn't asked me to do her talking for her, but I don't believe she'd look at you if you were in the same room with her."

Fred flushed, then went white.

This talk was hurting him a good deal more than he was willing to show.

Kitty Lester's sweet face had been haunting him a good deal lately.

He had once felt so sure of her, too.

"I think I may call up at the house this evening," said Fred, smiling at the youngster in what he meant to be a friendly way.

"Then it's me for home on the jump," uttered Ted, drily.

"Why?"

"I want to be there to see what happens. I wouldn't miss the sight for a farm."

Fred's face showed a worried look.

"See here, Ted, you don't really think that Kit is forgetting all her old friends, do you?"

"Does that mean—you?" queried the urchin.

"It means me, for one."

"Well," replied Ted, slowly, as if thinking it over, "from the two or three words that I've heard Kit say, I think she has formed my dislike for bad company. Good night!"

Ted started to dart away, but Fred sprang forward and caught him by the shoulders.

"Let go of me—you loafer!" panted Ted, indignantly.

"Not until you beg my pardon for what you've been saying to me," cried Fred, in sudden fierceness. "You're

spoiled, too, by that hound you call Young Wide Awake. Kit's got him on the brain just now. You'll all of you be sorry, one of these days, for taking up so thickly with that hoodlum. It won't do a girl like Kit any good to be known as Dick Halstead's girl."

But Ted had broken free by this time.

He drew back, his cheeks blazing, his eyes flashing scornfully.

"You—great—big—stiff!" shot out Ted.

"Here, I won't have any of that talk, even if you are cousin to Kit—who doesn't do herself any too much honor by the company she keeps——"

What else Fred might have said he didn't, anyway.

For Ted shot forward, bounced his little fist up and landed it smartly over Fred's mouth.

"You little hoodlum! You——"

"Oh, shut up calling names, and fight, like a real boy!" mimicked Ted, tantalizingly.

He had put up his fists in a way that would have done Terry Rourke proud.

"Fight—you?" gasped Fred, looking down in amazement at this little David defying a Goliath.

"Yep, if you've got the sand," nodded Ted.

"I'll spank you—that's what I'll do!" roared Fred, angrily, as he made a leap forward at the little tormentor.

But just at that moment four boys, walking abreast, turned the corner.

"Here, stop that!" vibrated Young Wide Awake's angry voice. "What does this mean, Fred Parsons? Haven't you got any more pride than to waylay fellows half your size?"

Wide had caught hold of Ted, and, though the latter struggled, held on to him.

"The kid's got to keep his fresh little mouth shut, then," growled Fred Parsons.

"Shame!" cried Wide. "Every one in town knows that you can't fight a fellow your own size, even though you do take fancy-priced boxing lessons every day. If you want to fight, here's Terry, Hal, Joe or myself. Which one do you choose?"

"Say, Wide, don't," pleaded Ted, almost tearfully. "Let go of me! I want this big stiff to myself. I can thump him—can thump daylight out of him, I believe. Let go of me. I want to try."

"Well, let go of him, then," snarled Fred.

"The first time I ever saw you really willing to fight," sneered Young Wide Awake, scornfully.

"Let go of me," almost howled Ted.

With another wrench and a twist he succeeded in jerking himself free. Then he danced up in front of Parsons.

"Come on, now—hit me!" begged Ted, while his four friends, seeing that he was bent on fight, crowded close to make sure that he got fair play.

But Fred, beginning to realize how foolish it all looked, was loath to do anything.

"Sissy!" sneered Ted, dancing in and landing a stinging one on Parsons's face.

With a roar, Fred leaped forward. Then the fight was on in earnest.

Ted, his little fists moving like parts of a perpetual-motion machine, managed to land a sharp one close to Fred's wind and another on the left side of his jaw.

But Fred, his anger up now, drove in a hard one that made the little fellow's nose bleed.

"See if you can do it again!" challenged Ted, doughtily.

Fred had to take two blows himself. Then he swung and drove home a blow that sent Ted down to the earth.

But the little fellow was up in a jiffy, looking for more. Clang!

"Stop!" shouted Young Wide Awake. "We've all got our fire duties to attend to now!"

Ted, devoted little fireman, and under his captain's orders at the instant the alarm sounded, dropped his fist at once.

Fred thought he saw a chance to drive in a parting blow, and a hard one.

He struck out, but watchful Terry jumped in between them, taking the blow on his own strong, bull-like neck.

"Thank ye, Par-rsons. Ye're a gentleman. Oi'll kape that blow and return it to you whin we both have leisure."

Then, as Young Wide Awake grappled with Ted and bore him off, all of the Washingtons took the bee-line for the engine house.

The Protectives, too, had their own "machine" to get out in response to this alarm.

Young Wide Awake was the first at the engine house.

He unlocked the big doors, swinging them open with a bang.

Then, as the fellows arrived and piled into their fire togs, they ran engine and hose carriage out and started for the hill.

For this alarm came from the same section where the morning's fire had been.

"The fire-bug! Is this more of his work?"

That was the thought uppermost in the mind of every one of the young firemen, as it was uppermost in the minds of most Belmont people when they heard the fire alarm come pealing in from the hill.

Washington One was away as swiftly as ever it had started for a fire.

They made the hill in good time.

Against a dark sky the fire stood out, guiding every one who ran up the hill.

The flames were coming from the third, uppermost floor of the handsome new house of Manahan, a wealthy contractor.

"Water pressure can't carry the hose stream up to the top story here, either!" groaned Young Wide Awake. "More bucket work cut out for us. I hope there's a private hydrant in the yard."

There was, as Manahan, meeting them near the gate, informed them.

Puffing, Manahan ran with the boys to lead them to the hydrant.

"Know how the blaze started?" demanded our hero.

"No," puffed Mr. Manahan. "It's a mystery to us."

"Then it isn't a mystery, I reckon," retorted Young Wide Awake. "The fire-bug again. He's burning now for revenge."

"Oh, I got a letter threatening this," gasped Manahan.

"And what did you do?"

"Turned the letter over to Chief Sharp."

"This is the fire-bug's answer, then," returned the young fire captain.

The hose having been attached, and the buckets slung off and distributed, Young Wide Awake turned to Scott, whose men were just racing up with the hook and ladder.

"Up with a ladder, quick," directed our hero. "I'll go up and see what needs being done."

In a twinkling the ladder was off the truck. Washington's boys aided the men in running it up.

"It's placed and firm, captain," reported Scott.

Gripping the rungs, Young Wide Awake mounted nimbly, Ted Lester just at his heels.

The crowd saw Young Wide Awake at the top of the ladder.

From there he jumped inside, his body standing out an instant sharply defined against the red glow of the flames.

Boom! Up in that blazing region there was a tremendous explosion.

What had happened to Young Wide Awake not one of the startled spectators could guess. But they saw a burst of flame and smoke leap out through the window with a force that hurled Ted Lester from the ladder.

CHAPTER VII.

PAST THE FACE OF DEATH!

Downward Ted's body came through the air, hurtling and turning as if he had been shot out through the window.

Terry, standing just below, saw the little fellow coming.

With a cry of horror, Rourke leaped forward two steps, then stood with arms outstretched.

As Lester's body shot past him Terry made a grab.

Safe catch!

Terry leaped up in the air at the second of the catch, then landed lightly.

He set Ted down on his feet.

"More scared than hur-rt, little one!" cheered the Irish lad.

"Aw, who's scared?" demanded Ted, his coolness coming back in a flash. "I knew you was there!"

"But what happened?" demanded a dozen at once, while the crowd thronged around Ted.

Terry left them there, he and Hal mounting the ladder so fast that it looked like a race.

Terry was first to leap into the room where the explosion had occurred.

But Hal was only a second or so behind him.

"Dick!"

"Wide."

There was a gaping hole in the floor.

The flames had gained since that explosion, as if fed by it.

That room looked like the inside of a furnace.

Young Wide Awake came groping toward them on his hands and knees.

"Are ye that badly hur-rt?" demanded Terry, leaping toward his chum.

He bent over him, gripping him, trying to raise him.

"What happened?" demanded Young Wide Awake, almost stupidly.

"That's what we'd like to know," burst out Hal.

"There was an explosion, wasn't there?"

"Was there?" agreed Terry.

"Something seemed to blow up in front of me—over in that corner," Young Wide Awake went on, dazedly. "What it was I don't know. But the force of it was awful. It threw me down, and I think I must have slipped my senses for a moment."

"But there's no bones broke?" demanded Terry, hoarsely.

"No, I don't believe so. Though how I escaped was a miracle."

"'Twas that," agreed Terry. "Look over yure head, and ye'll see a hole in the roof."

"The force was mostly all upward, then," muttered Young Wide Awake.

Then the choking in that close, stifling atmosphere aroused him to duty.

"You here, Hal? Then get down here and get the bucket line up as fast as ever you can. Terry, you'll stay with me."

"Let me stay in your place, Dick," begged Hal Norton.

"This is just the place for me to be," retorted Young Wide Awake, grimly. "Hal, let's see in how little time you can get the first bucket up."

That settled it, as Hal knew as well as any one.

He made a break for the ladder, bellowing down below:

"Wide's safe—and on duty!"

From below the news was greeted with a cheer so thundering that it showed what a big place Young Wide Awake filled in the hearts of Belmont people.

Fred Parsons had just succeeded in getting his Protective crew and truck to the grounds.

Therefore Fred was just in time to hear Mr. Manahan turn to his grown-up son and demand:

Jerry, you rascal, did you take that keg of powder up to your room after I'd forbidden you to do it?"

Jerry, an awkward-looking fellow of twenty-two, flushingly admitted the charge.

"You young scoundrel!" roared his father. "You've come near costing the best fireman in Belmont his sacred life!"

"Gunpowder up there?" echoed Fred, turning to his fellows. "That was what caused the explosion? Fellows, you needn't take the trouble to do anything here. The insur-

ance money is forfeited when gunpowder is kept in the house. Don't trouble yourselves."

Mr. Manahan turned upon Fred, shooting a look of disgust at him.

"No, don't do anything, boys," jeered the contractor, hotly. "There's men enough around here. We don't need you. Scoot!"

Fred stood still, glaring sullenly at the contractor.

"Did you hear me?" glared Manahan.

"Yes," grunted Fred.

"Then get off the grounds."

"You can't order us," retorted Fred. "We belong to the fire department."

"Chief," bawled the contractor to Mr. Pelton, who had just come up, "these young dudes who call themselves the Protectives refuse to help save my stuff because the fire insurance is forfeited. If they won't work, can't I order them off the grounds?"

"Certainly," replied Chief Pelton, promptly.

"You hear that, do you?" raged Mr. Manahan, turning upon Fred. "Now, you dudes get off the grounds on the jump, or you'll feel some large and heavy hands on you!"

Fred whitened, while the fellows of his company began to squirm with uneasiness.

The small boys of the town would jeer at their uniforms—those natty, handsome uniforms—if the Protectives should be ordered away on account of their refusal to do their work.

"Don't make a scene and a row," urged Parsons, under his breath. "Of course we'll help, as fellow-townsmen, but you understand that we don't have to."

"Huh!" grunted Mr. Manahan, as he saw the young Protectives start sheepishly but briskly into the house.

Young Wide Awake in the meantime had gotten the bucket brigade at work.

Up there in all the flame, heat, smoke and steam he and Terry were working like beavers.

Ted, not a whit hurt, after all, was back at his post as aide, shouting down an occasional order from our hero.

Chief Pelton, after sending in a second alarm to bring Torrent One to the scene, managed to climb the ladder without disturbing the bucket line.

The chief stepped into the room, looking about him.

"Wide," he declared, "you two can't stand this long. You will have to get down soon and order two others up in your place."

"I wouldn't order anybody else where I wouldn't stay myself, chief," quietly replied our hero, not pausing in his work of receiving buckets and dashing the water against the flames.

Chief Pelton thereupon felt that he could not leave a spot where two of his bravest firemen were battling not only against the flames, but also against death itself.

He stood there, back by the window, until he heard the jangling bell of Torrent One as it rolled swiftly into the yard.

"I'll get Torrent up here, too," called Pelton, and, turn-

ing, made his way down the under side of the ladder, without hindering Young Wide Awake's bucket line.

But Pelton, on his way down, had a narrow escape from flames beginning to leap out through the cracked window on the floor below.

"It's hot up there, ain't it, Washington?" bellowed Chief Pelton.

"Pretty hot, sir," Slam Bang answered.

"You can't stand it two minutes longer. Pass my order to Young Wide Awake and Rourke to come down at once. Tell 'em it's my order!"

"Oh, well," choked Wide, disappointedly, as he and Terry emptied their buckets and started toward the window.

The bucket line, under the chief's sharp order, was already clearing from the ladder.

"You first, Ted," ordered Young Wide Awake.

Lester ran down as nimbly as a monkey.

"Now you, Terry!"

Rourke sprang to the ladder.

Wide was about to follow, when he remembered the fire-axe that he had brought up with him.

As he bent, our hero heard a shriek.

It was followed by another.

Then up from the ground came an awful shout.

It was from Mr. Manahan, who, struggling in agony, was trying to break loose from four or five men who held him.

"My two babies are up there!" he screamed hoarsely. "The nurse-girl told me the babies were safe out of the house. Let go of me! Let me get up to my children!"

But Young Wide Awake, who had located the cries on the other side of one of the walls of the room, dashed to the window.

"Let no one come up! I'll get the children out if I live!"

He turned, rushed at the wall separating him from the Manahan children, and swung his axe with all the strength there was in him.

A few lusty, hard-hit blows, and the wall of plaster and lathes crumbled before him.

Two children, a boy of seven and a girl of five, crouched near the opening in the wall.

"Come on, youngsters," hailed Wide, leaping through the hole in the wall and getting one with either hand. "Follow me and don't breathe, or you'll draw in a lot of smoke. Here we are, now!"

The children, left there by their criminally stupid nurse-girl, had slept through all of the excitement up to a moment ago.

They were coughing and strangling from the smoke now as Young Wide Awake piloted them to the window, telling them to lean out for better breathing.

The ladder had been left there for our hero's final escape, but now, as Wide glanced down, he saw the flames licking at four of the rungs.

"Get out the life net there!" he called down sharply.

But Hal Norton had already raced for the net, and now many eager hands were spreading it.

"I'm going to toss you down into the net," Young Wide Awake explained to the little Manahan boy. "You won't be hurt. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid, if you ain't," responded the little fellow, looking up bravely.

"Good enough, little man!"

As the net stood spread, Wide leaned far out from the window, poising the boy in his arms.

A good throw and a straight one! With just one little yell of dismay the little fellow landed in the net and was fished out uninjured.

"Now, then," cried Wide, cheerily, as he turned to the girl. "You see, your brother was not hurt."

"Yes, he was! He yelled," protested the little girl. "Don't throw me down there—oh, please don't!"

The child began to shriek wildly, and Wide muttered to himself:

"Poor little thing, there's no use saving her one way, only to scare her to death."

So he said soothingly:

"There, there, little sister! We won't throw you. You shall see how safely we'll get down. You and I will go together. See how easy it will be!"

Wide, who had calculated on jumping himself, after tossing the girl, now yanked off his rubber coat.

He did the child up in that protecting coat—a snug, safe bundle.

"No, no—not the ladder!" bawled up Chief Pelton, hoarsely.

"I've got to—the child's scared to death!" shouted back the young fire captain.

He went rapidly down the ladder, the folds of rubber protecting the little girl from the flames.

He reached the ground, amid wild cheers, and turned the little girl over to its parents.

Then Wide walked stiffly away.

"Hur-rt, ar-ren't ye?" whispered Terry, anxiously.

"My legs got a little singed and scorched—the tendons probably," Wide whispered back. "Don't say anything about it."

Reinforced by Torrent's bucket line, the Washingtons now reached the top story by other windows.

Passageways were chopped through walls, and two steady lines of buckets were passed in.

Young Wide Awake was still on hand, directing his crew, though he did not do any more water-throwing.

Then, when the fire was out at last, and when Chief Pelton had just announced that he was satisfied that this fire was more of the mysterious work of the fire-bug, there came another cause of excitement.

Young Wide Awake, without warning, tottered and fell over on the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAIR PLAY!

For three days they kept Young Wide Awake at home after that.

The tendons of his legs had been more seriously injured than the young fireman himself had believed.

So, surrounded by his school-books, and with many, many calls from the members of Washington One, Wide had remained in the front room.

But on the fourth day, Kitty Lester, who had talked with Mrs. Halstead over the telephone, arrived early in the afternoon.

She had called before, but this was a special call.

"The doctor says you can go out for a stroll to-day, Dick, dear," she whispered, with a smile that sent all the blood dancing through the young fireman's pulses. "So I'm going out with you, to make sure that you don't go too far, or over-exert yourself."

Then, as Mrs. Halstead had stepped into the next room, she bent and kissed him.

"Why, say, there's some sense in being laid up, when a fellow can have a treat like this at the end!" declared Wide, rising joyously. "As for over-exerting myself, I've been coddled too much. Pshaw! I'm as strong as a lion again!"

He stretched slightly.

Then Kitty came closer, slipping an arm around him as if to steady him.

But Wide passed his own right arm firmly around her waist and paid her back that kiss then and there.

"Now, you'd better let me help you on with your overcoat," suggested Miss Kitty, reddening.

"I can get it on myself, but I'm not going to be cheated out of the pleasure of having you help me," laughed the happy young fellow.

Then, both full of good spirits, the young people set out on their walk.

It was simply chance that led them toward Ellis Street.

But here, ahead of them as they turned the corner, of course they had to sight Fred Parsons and Larry Downes coming toward them.

Fred caught sight of them, Kitty clinging tenderly to Wide's arm.

Parsons stiffened, then whitened.

Still, he tried to put on a good front.

He nudged Larry and whispered something as the two came nearer to our young friends.

"Good afternoon, Miss Lester," hailed both young men, raising their hats just before they reached Kitty.

But that self-possessed and dignified young lady had heard more than one thing from glib little Ted.

Now, as Parsons and Downes greeted her, Miss Kitty looked straight ahead, without response.

It was the cut, dead and direct.

Fred whitened again as he passed the girl.

Then, all the ugliness in him coming to the surface, he sneered:

"Perhaps girls who frequent bad company do well not to recognize their friends of better days."

Young Wide Awake wheeled, his eyes blazing battle.

"Don't mind the fellow," whispered Kitty, with a tug at his arm.

"But I've got to," muttered our hero, in a low tone.

Parsons had stopped, as if to see what would come of his desperate insult.

"Fred," quivered our hero, "that remark writes you down as the worst kind of a beast."

"Oh, you're talking, are you?" jeered Fred.

"I see plainly enough," retorted Wide, spiritedly, "that I've got to do more than talk. I can't let an insult to a young lady go by."

"What are you going to do?" sneered Fred, an evil glint in his eyes.

"Fight!" retorted Young Wide Awake, promptly.

"Don't," pleaded Kitty, in terror. "You can't, dear; you're not in fit condition."

"Fight? Pooh!" sneered Parsons, while Downes grinned.

"The cause isn't worthy of a fight."

That was a more direct insult to Kitty Lester than before.

Our hero looked at her, his face white with unspeakable rage as he gently unclasped her hand from his arm.

"Don't! Don't fight, Dick—not to-day!" she begged piteously.

Then, to her former sweetheart, Kitty spoke contemptuously:

"Fred Parsons, I never realized quite what a degraded and worthless fellow you are until now, when I find you trying to urge a fight with a young man who isn't fit to stand up in any kind of contest. If you want me to believe in your manhood in the least, wait until Captain Halstead is in better condition to take care of himself."

"Why should I care about your good opinion, Miss Lester?" demanded the now desperate, wholly reckless Fred.

"I'm sorry, awfully, Miss Kitty," protested Wide, huskily. "But, you see, it has to be!"

Without stopping to take off his coat, Young Wide Awake doubled his fists, stepping squarely forward to meet Parsons.

He struck at him, but Fred, in much better condition for footwork, dodged nimbly and countered.

Wide tried to dodge it, but got a scraping blow on the face.

"You coward—Fred!" gasped Kitty.

Young Wide Awake, on his still unsteady legs, had to take three more blows, though he dodged a part of their effect.

But he was on the point of being quickly whipped, and he knew it.

Just at that instant Terry came whistling around the corner, his hands in his pockets.

For just a fraction of a second Rourke paused, his whistle stopped.

Then his hands come out of his pockets as if by magic.

Forward he sprang, and a thumping blow caught Larry Downes on the jaw, sprawling him.

From him, without pause, Terry leaped at Fred, who, seeing what was coming, turned and tried to get away.

But Terry leaped after him, caught him by the coat col-

lar, jerked him back and swatted him in the face until Fred lustily cried for quits.

"Then come wid me, ye well-dhress loafer," ordered Terry. "Come back till we see what 'twas all about."

Protesting, Fred was dragged back to the spot of the fight.

Young Wide Awake, white and rather weak, was leaning against the fence, smiling grimly.

Our hero quickly explained what the trouble had been.

Larry Downes, who had first gotten to a sitting posture, now reached his feet and tried to slide away.

"Don't take the throuble to sneak away, Larry, bucko," warned Terry, ominously. "Av ye do, the coming back'll be loikely to hur-rt!"

Larry halted, uncertain what to do now.

But Terry had turned to our hero with:

"Now, Wide, what's to be done?"

"Let the loafers apologize to Miss Lester," replied our hero.

"Ye hear?" demanded Terry, giving Fred a shake by the collar.

"I've nothing to apologize for," glowered Fred, sulkily.

"Thin ye've a lot to lear-rn, and ye'll begin lear-rning it now," warned dangerous Terry.

"Let them go. I don't want any apology from such cads," announced Kitty. "I'm tired of the scene and of their presence. Let them go."

"Oi won't, thin, craving yure par-rdon," retorted Terry, doggedly. "'Tis apologize—or eat a bit of the sidewalk. Now, then, Par-rsons, ye worthless cad, what'll it be?"

He shook Fred so hard that that worthy surrendered.

"I offer Miss Lester my apology," he stammered.

Kitty merely nodded, coldly.

"An' say," prompted Terry, "that ye'll be careful, after this, to act as much loike a gentleman as ye can when Miss Lester is by."

Fred repeated the promise.

"Now, yure turn, Downes, ye illigant loafer," called Terry.

"You feel like a big man, don't you, now the two of you are together?" scowled Downes.

"Well," demanded Terry, "two to two is fair fighting, ain't it? Out with that apology, or ilse Oi'm coming for ye."

He let go of Fred, moving toward Larry.

There was that flashing in the Irish lad's eyes that made Downes hastily decide to apologize, which he did in the same terms used by Fred Parsons.

"Now, off wid the two av ye!" choked Terry. "Off at wanst, before Oi forget meself and do something that'd be rude!"

As the two discomfited rivals slunk away, Terry explained:

"Now, 'tis glad Oi am that Oi called at yure house, Wide, in sayson. Some one told me ye had come down this way, and I came afther ye, meaning not to butt in, but to keep to the rear and be handy at need."

CHAPTER IX.

TRICKED!

Two days later Wide felt so much like himself again that he was at school and in the engine house.

But Kitty had called him up on the telephone to ask:

"Don't you feel strong enough now——"

"Why, I feel as strong as ever I did," he broke in.

"Don't you think, Dick, that a saddle ride would do you good?"

"A saddle ride? I can't imagine anything better."

"You can't?"

"That is, if——"

"Well, Dick?"

"I'm going to make conditions now," warned the boy, eagerly.

"I'm listening."

"A saddle ride all alone would be a dead, flat failure. But if I had company——"

"What company do you want?"

"You, and you alone, Mistress Kitty!"

"Oh!" came in a tone of pretended relief. "I was afraid you were going to speak for Faith."

"Kitty!"

"Then I'll suit you, will I?"

"As if you didn't know," cried Young Wide Awake's earnest voice.

"Then our carriage will come down for you right away."

"Thank you, but a fellow who's strong enough to go off in saddle is strong enough to walk."

"If I'm to go with you, Dick, the carriage will call for you. On no other condition will I ride this afternoon. Now, then?"

"Oh, well," agreed the young fireman, meekly.

"Then the carriage will be at your house inside of fifteen minutes."

And it was.

It found Dick ready and eager, as did it find Miss Kitty at the other end of the route.

Then two handsome saddle ponies were brought around to the front door.

Kitty insisted that a groom, not Wide, should help her to mount.

She would have had Wide helped in the same fashion, but he, disdaining such help, vaulted up into the saddle.

"Now, only an hour of this, mind you," warned Miss Kitty, as they turned out at the gate.

"I wish it could be forever," murmured the young lover.

Kitty laughed, then flecked her pony into a gentle canter.

Young Wide Awake rode to her side, then asked:

"Was that man near the gate one of the detectives guarding your father's place against the fire-bug?"

"Yes, though papa believes we've heard the last of the fire-bug, and for good. I hope we have."

"So do I, Miss Kitty," rejoined the young fireman. "Still, it's hardly a safe gamble."

"I wonder your father wasn't afraid to let you come out this afternoon in this fashion."

"Mamma suggested that, but dad replied that he wasn't afraid to trust me anywhere—well, anywhere that you are, Dick."

"That's mighty good of your father, Kitty," glowed the young fireman.

"Papa said his view of you was based on experience," replied the girl, quietly.

"That's also good of him."

"No, it isn't, Dick. It's fact."

"Where are we going this afternoon?" asked Wide, reddening and ready to change the subject.

"Out on the country roads will be best, Dick. Then we won't have so many autos or carriages to dodge."

"You still treat me as an invalid, Kitty!" he cried reproachfully.

"No, indeed! I'm just treating you, Dick, as a young man whom the town can't afford to lose through any form of carelessness on my part."

Wide laughed good-naturedly.

It was a mild, end-of-the-winter day, with the sun out bright.

To Wide it seemed that the very breeze breathed happiness.

He mentioned as much to Kitty, who replied demurely:

"One's company has much to do with that."

"That's just what I meant to say," declared the young fireman.

Kitty looked at him with a flashing, teasing smile in her merry eyes.

She often looked at him in that way when he tried to say something unusually gallant.

Wide could never quite decide, at such times, whether she was pleased, or whether she was laughing at him indulgently for his crude attempts at gallantry.

"I'd like to know just what you think of me—what you really think of me, Kitty," he went on, after a moment.

"Would you?"

"I'd prefer knowing that to any other knowledge on earth."

"Oh, what a silly young boy!"

"But I would really like to know, Kitty."

"Some time, perhaps, I'll tell you," she half-promised.

But she was looking at him again with that teasing smile, which made him decide to postpone pressing the question.

Rather than ride through the pretty little town of Sagmore, Miss Kitty seemed to prefer turning off along a lonely but pretty road to the left.

Their course took them between woods on either side.

"Hullo," muttered Young Wide Awake, looking ahead, "there's some one who wants to speak to us."

Both glanced down the road, to see a shabbily dressed, elderly man.

He held a handkerchief close to his face and dabbed his eyes as if he had been weeping.

But now, seeing the young people approaching on horse-

back, the old man held up one hand as if to attract their attention.

He surveyed them through blue goggles as they approached and reined in.

"Young people," he hailed, "have you just a little time to be good to the old?"

His voice was thin and piping.

Wide promptly thrust his hand down into his trousers pocket for one of the only two silver quarters that he owned.

"Not that," spoke the old man, quickly. "Not money. But my wife and I have been tramping to reach Norwich, where we have friends. Ten minutes ago, while we were coming through the woods, my poor wife fell, and I couldn't get her to speak after that. Will you come back a little way with me to see if you can tell me what is the matter with her?"

The old man's voice shook tremulously. There was more than a hint of sobs in his speech.

"Why, of course I'll go," uttered Wide, leaping down from his saddle.

Kitty, too, slipped to the ground.

"Follow me," begged the old man, turning eagerly. "You can lead your horses in there."

He led the way with faltering, uneven, yet eager steps.

Wide and Kitty followed.

At last he halted.

"There!" he whispered tremulously. "Can you see here, in there, lying on the ground?"

He stepped behind them, pointing.

Suddenly Young Wide Awake was hurled to the ground with force.

Kitty, uttering a shriek of terror, was thrown to a seat at his side.

"Don't you try to get up, Young Wide Awake! Don't you stir, or I'll kill the girl!" roared the man, in a hoarser voice, as he drew a revolver and menaced Kitty.

Then with his other hand he tore off wig and goggles, and stood forth—

Gregg Parks, the fire-bug!

CHAPTER X.

KITTY LESTER'S GRIT.

Kitty Lester looked up at the fire-bug with wide-open, frightened eyes.

Then a flash of defiance crossed her face.

She moved as if about to rise.

"Stay where you are," hissed Parks.

"Yes, stay where you are," repeated Young Wide Awake, hoarsely.

He cared little what might happen to himself now, but all his thought, all his effort, his cunning, must be used to get the girl out of this frightful predicament.

"I wish old man Lester could see us now," uttered Parks, grimly. "My, what a scare it would give him! He'd be glad to call off the detectives, who don't catch any one."

"Let the young lady start back for the road," begged

Wide. "Then, Parks, you and I can settle with each other—for I suppose you have a score that you want to settle with me."

"Yes; but Miss Lester remains," replied Parks, roughly. "I shall do the planning now, Young Wide Awake. All you will have to do will be to listen."

But, surely, you don't intend to keep this young lady a prisoner?"

"Just what I do intend to do!"

"But to what end?" demanded the young fireman. "Her being a prisoner here can do you no good."

"Her being here can help bring old man Lester to terms, can't it?" demanded the fire-bug, harshly.

"How?" demanded Wide.

"He'll pay for her freedom, won't he?"

"Still harping on blackmail, eh?" cried the young fireman.

"Yes, still harping on blackmail," gritted Parks. "But I shall call for more money than I demanded before."

"And you expect to get it? You have no idea of the fight there is in John Lester."

"Humph! He cares for his daughter, doesn't he?"

"Of course."

"And he is a very rich man, isn't he?"

"He is said to be."

"Then would he let twenty thousand dollars stand in the way of his daughter's freedom and safety?"

"My father won't stand for being blackmailed," broke in Kitty, coldly. "If you're figuring on that, you may as well stop."

"We shall see," laughed Parks, coolly. "Miss Lester, either your father will part with twenty thousand dollars, or he must lose you. Did you ever hear how a cornered rat fights? I'm cornered—and I mean to get out of the corner. If you don't get out of your corner safely, it will be because you and your father and this young man are too obstinate about meeting my terms."

"Soak him, Terry!" burst suddenly from Young Wide Awake, as he glanced eagerly behind Parks.

The fire-bug did not start or turn.

He merely laughed.

"That's too simple, Young Wide Awake. Your friend isn't behind me. I got caught that way the first time I was sent to prison. I don't fall into that trap these days."

"You'll fall into one trap or another," predicted Wide. "No scoundrel succeeds in keeping at large forever."

"Now we must set about getting this money," went on Parks. "I must be far from here by midnight."

"About as far as the Belmont police station," mocked Young Wide Awake.

"I am going to send you to Mr. Lester to tell him the terms on which he can have his daughter safely delivered to him," went on Parks.

"Me? I thought I was a prisoner."

"I am going to let you go, Young Wide Awake. I shall have sufficient pledge of your good behavior, for I shall keep the girl here."

"Something wrong with your plan, then," retorted Wide. "I won't go and leave Miss Lester."

"She will be safe with me. I can assure you of that."

"Since when," demanded Wide, mockingly, "do you think I have been foolish enough to take the guarantee of a fellow like you?"

"You'll have to take it in this case."

"I simply won't."

"It'll be Miss Lester's only chance for safety, or even her life."

"I won't leave her here."

"You'd rather be shot?" asked Parks, holding the weapon so that he could bring it into line in an instant.

"Yes," said Wide, calmly.

"Oh, come, stop this nonsense. If you don't go to Mr. Lester, Young Wide Awake, how is he ever to know of his daughter's plight? How is he to buy her safety? How is he to know where to come with the money?"

"It's your job to think that out," retorted the young fireman.

"Then you are going to throw away the girl's only chance?"

"I'm not going to leave her here with you."

"Not even to save her life—the only chance?"

"I won't leave Miss Lester here with you—for any reason whatever!" Young Wide Awake retorted, with cool energy. "I won't leave her unless she commands it. Do you so command, Miss Kitty?"

"No; do not leave me," replied Kitty, in a voice that rang true with grit.

Parks swore under his breath.

"You see," jeered our hero, "there's no possible way of getting your message to Mr. Lester."

"I shall find another way, then," gritted Parks, whose face had gone deadly white. "First, Young Wide Awake, I shall have to kill you. Then I will hold the girl as a close, safe hostage. Her father will pay the money in the end. If he tries to rescue her from me, he will only see her shot down at the moment of attempted rescue. Young Wide Awake, how can you figure that you are saving or protecting this young lady by remaining here?"

"I don't have to figure," retorted the young fireman, doggedly. "I am only obeying Miss Lester's wish by remaining here. So remain I shall."

"Are you going to allow this, Miss Lester?" demanded Parks, eyeing her keenly, coldly, like a man who is prepared to carry out all his threats. "Will you lose your own life and break your father's heart?"

"You needn't look for any help from me, fellow," retorted Kitty, with a contempt in her voice that made the fire-bug wince. "So far as I am concerned, your plan will fail. My escort will remain with me, too, at my own request."

"Remain? He sha'n't remain!" raged Parks, giving way to sudden fury before this obstinate thwarting of his plans. "Young Wide Awake, on your feet! Face about and start toward Mr. Lester's. If you don't, I shoot to kill. Tell

Mr. Lester to be here within two hours. Tell him he must raise the full sum of twenty thousand dollars, somehow. Tell him to bring only you with him. Tell him if he fails to be here within two hours he will find only the dead body of his only child."

Wide sat on the ground, looking up at Parks, his young face a study.

"You heard me!" uttered Parks. "Up and start."

Wide kept his seat, without a word.

"Oh, you are going to go on defying me, are you?" quivered the fire-bug. "Then your death will, at least, be a lesson to the girl!"

The hammer of his self-cocking revolver, under a slow but steady pressure, began to rise.

When that hammer rose to its fullest height it would slip and fall, hurling a bullet into Young Wide Awake's brain.

"You have until I count three!" warned Parks. "One——"

——"two, three! Shoot!" dared Wide.

There was a swish of skirts, an instant spring, a scream.

Kitty Lester, overlooked for an instant, had asserted her grit at the first chance.

Now she sprang upon Parks ere the fire-bug could turn.

She grappled with that pistol hand and wrist.

Young Wide Awake was at her side in the lifting of an eyelid.

With one hand he gripped the fellow's throat, while his other hand went to Kitty's aid.

A wrench and they had the pistol free, Kitty swiftly letting it go to Young Wide Awake.

But Parks, with a scream of rage, had leaped back, drawing another revolver.

"Don't try to shoot," he warned, retreating. "If you do, I'll be sure to kill the girl!"

Young Wide Awake, with his left arm free, thrust Kitty behind him.

But he was forced to stand there, sheltering her from harm with his own body.

Parks, with a sudden cry, turned and dashed through the woods.

Wide's first temptation was to dash after the fellow.

"Are you going to try to catch him?" asked Kitty.

"No; if I do, and he should happen to get me instead, you, Kitty, would be at his mercy. No, no! I'd like to get him, but my first move must be to get you safely home. Kit, take the bridles of both ponies and lead them toward the road. I will keep close to you, but I must have my whole mind and both eyes clear to watch that that scoundrel doesn't ambush us on the way to the road."

Kitty Lester promptly did as she was asked.

Wide followed just in the trail of the ponies, keeping himself alert every instant.

They reached the road, however, without sign of Parks.

"He's only biding his time," muttered Young Wide Awake. "He is the kind of scoundrel who doesn't give up,

once he has formed his plan for getting other people's money."

Now that they had reached the road, Kitty, as she halted, was found to be trembling.

She was white, too, and her voice shook as she said:

"Dick, papa was right when he said that he felt safe about me where you were."

"Poor girl!" muttered Wide, looking at her. "This has been a terrible experience for you."

"No, a happy one," she disputed, forcing a smile. "I knew you were brave and manly, Dick, but I have never had such a splendid proof before."

Young Wide Awake devoted an instant to giving the girl a hand up to her saddle.

Then, vaulting into his own saddle, he became instantly alert again.

He had an uneasy belief that Parks was not by any means at the end of his villainies.

"Canter!" Wide called to Kitty.

She urged her pony forward.

He, riding at her left, to be between her and possible harm, kept just at her side.

"Now, gallop!" cried the boy.

They went swiftly down the road.

Crack!

As Wide had feared, Parks had dashed through the woods bent on further mischief.

Whizz-zz-zz!

The bullet sped before our hero's face.

It went past Kitty Lester's face, too.

With a little cry she shrank back for an instant, then smiled bravely.

Wide, as he rode at a gallop, had swung in his saddle.

Raising the pistol he and Kitty had captured, he fired twice.

Between his own shots came another shot from the woods.

The bullet sped just behind their heads.

"Ride faster!" cried Wide, and an instant later he added:

"We're out of revolver range now, but keep riding fast."

Then he bent anxiously over toward her.

"Neither bullet touched you, Kit?"

"Oh, no!"

"Honor bright?"

"I wasn't harmed, Dick."

They kept to the gallop until they reached the Main Road.

"We can slow up now," counseled the boy. "Even at a trot we can keep ahead of that villain all the way to your home."

Kitty had regained her color.

Her face was bright now, her eyes sparkling.

"You don't think you hit him, Dick?" she asked.

"No such luck!" grunted the young fireman. "I couldn't even see him—nothing but the smoke."

Ere long they turned in at the Lester gate.

"You can keep your eyes open for the fire-bug," Wide

called to the man. "We've just met him and exchanged shots with him. He's on the warpath now and no deed is too desperate for him."

The detective came running after them.

As the young people dismounted at the door Mr. Lester threw it open.

"Something has happened," he guessed quickly.

"Yes, sir, nodded Young Wide Awake.

Then he turned to help Kitty to the ground, while a groom bounded up and took charge of the ponies.

Inside, with the detective present, the young people detailed what had happened.

"Disguised, eh? And as a feeble old man?" asked the detective. "No wonder our men haven't been able to find the scoundrel."

Young Wide Awake looked at the detective as if he thought the wonder of it was that detectives ever expected to catch a criminal.

"Your people must get on the warpath again," urged John Lester, "and stay there."

The detective left them, to hasten out and find the detective who had command of the squad.

"It would be better for my peace of mind," muttered Mr. Lester, whose face was uneasy and white, "if I settled with this scoundrel and sent him away. But I can't do it. It would be cowardice. Every time a man of wealth pays money to these fellows for safety he encourages all the other vicious men in the country to think up similar plans."

"No, you really can't give in and buy the fellow off," replied Young Wide Awake.

"But I think I must send you and your mother away, for the present, Kitty," pursued her father. "Then you two will be safe."

"Do you think, papa, we would run away and leave you here alone?" demanded the girl, spiritedly. "You have a poor opinion of us, it seems. Don't make cowards of us, sir."

"We can't fail much longer to catch this scoundrel," urged Young Wide Awake. "For one, I'm going to get out on his trail. Terry, Hal and Joe will help me. It will be right to their taste. And I can call on others of our fellows, if need be. Then there is the Belmont force."

"A lot of good the Belmont police have done us, so far!" muttered John Lester.

"But Chief Sharp has been at work, sir, and vigilantly," protested Young Wide Awake, warmly. "I know that much. If he has failed to find Gregg Parks, it has been because the fellow has been too shrewd, so far. But no scoundrel is shrewd enough to keep forever ahead of the honest men who hunt him down. Don't be afraid, Mr. Lester. Either Parks skips at once, or else you will soon have the pleasure of looking at him in a cell in the Belmont police station."

"I hope you are right," sighed John Lester, as our hero arose to go. "I could stand this strain for myself. But when the fellow tries to hit at my family I confess that I am almost a coward."

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIL GETS HOT.

Young Wide Awake halted in front of the post-office.

He stared curiously, meaningly, at Terry Rourke, who returned the look with interest.

It was the next morning.

These two young firemen, and Hal and Joe, had secured leave to stay away from school for the day in order that they might join in the hunt for the fire-bug.

Hal and Joe were away somewhere together.

But it was Wide and Terry who had secured the first clue to Parks.

"The fellow is not only around this part of the country still," throbbed Wide, "but he's even lurking in the town."

For they had just secured important news.

First, they had learned that a feeble, shabbily dressed old woman, her face hidden behind a thick green veil, had been begging on the streets of Belmont.

So far as the boys knew, she had succeeded in obtaining the total of twenty-five cents from charitable passers-by.

Then and there the old woman's begging operations had ceased.

Next she appeared in the light of a purchaser.

She had gone to one of the Main Street stores, where she had invested her quarter in a bottle of gasoline.

"That tells us who the old woman is," muttered Young Wide Awake. "Yesterday Gregg Parks was disguised as an old man, to-day as an old man. Whew! But the fellow must be getting at the end of his cleverness when he can think of no better disguise."

"But he ain't at the end of his thricks, bedad!" muttered Terry. "Buyin' gasoline again! Yet why should he have to beg? Shure, Himple and Shilden must have paid him money enough to keep him in funds for a while."

"Chief Sharp told me the other day how criminals do when they make a good haul," replied Wide. "Of course, right after committing a crime they live in constant dread that the police will overhaul them. If they're caught, they don't want the money caught, too, as they will need that in hiring lawyers. So a crook, when he gets his ill-gotten money, buys post-office money orders, or bank drafts, and mails them somewhere else where he can get them and cash them as soon as he finds out that he's safe from the police this time. The money that Himple and Shilden paid him Parks must have sent off in that fashion, saving only a few dollars for himself. Having used his money up, he was forced to turn beggar. But he wanted more gasoline; therefore it's a cinch that he is up to more crime in his line."

From the store "the old woman behind the green veil" was said to have walked eastward along Main Street.

"An old woman in a green veil might be noticed," urged Wide. "Terry, we'll see if we can trail that party."

They stopped frequently, inquiring of storekeepers and passers-by.

Yes, a few people had noted "the old woman."

Most of these people had not noticed particularly which way the old woman had gone.

Yet, in fifteen minutes our hero had worked down as far as the corner of Holmes and Main streets.

Here, presently, they learned from a housekeeper that the old woman had turned down Holmes toward Ellis.

From here they followed her trail down Ellis Street.

Here she had turned eastward, keeping along the northerly side of the street.

"She can't have gone much further, without falling into the river," declared Young Wide Awake, as the two young firemen followed along Ellis Street.

"There's Fred Parsons sitting up there at the window in the Protective house," nudged Terry. "Let's ask him if he saw the old woman."

"Yes, let's," returned Wide, drily. "If he really did see her, he'd steer us off on the wrong track, and then go on a glory hunt himself."

"The party we're after may have gone into one of these houses ahead," suggested Rourke.

"And most likely did, but which house?"

They were going through the poorer portion of Ellis Street, the part that lay near the river-front.

"There's hardly anybody along here that'd be likely to hire a fire-bug," whispered our hero to his friend. "Few of the people along here have any household goods that they'd be able to insure for as much as five hundred dollars."

"He may have friends down here in the poorer houses," suggested Terry.

"It wouldn't be healthful for any one who was discovered to be Gregg Parks's friend. The Belmont people are in such a frame of mind these days that they'd be likely to lynch any one who tried to shelter the fire-bug."

They halted at last, uncertain.

"We can't enter houses and search," grunted Wide. "Terry, I think we'll have to telephone the police and let them lead in the hunt from this point. Of course we can go with the police."

"Oi'm thinkin'," muttered Terry, suddenly, "that we'll have sooner need av the fire depar-tment than av the police."

He pointed ahead, and from one of the houses Young Wide Awake saw smoke coming.

It was pouring through an open parlor window on the ground floor, the open window letting in air that was feeding the flames rapidly and helping them to spread.

"Run to the box over there, Terry, and turn in an alarm. Then jump in front of the house and stay there. I'm going in to investigate."

Wide dashed down the street.

As he darted up the steps of the house he heard the first clang of the fire alarm.

Our hero jerked the door-bell violently.

No one answering, he rang again and hammered on the panels.

But still no one came to answer the summons.

"You stay here, Terry," shouted our hero. "Me for the back of the house, to see if I can get in. I believe the folks are all away."

There was an alleyway at one side of the house.

Down this alley Young Wide Awake raced, to find the back of the house protected by a high board fence.

Scrambling along the top of the fence, he looked inside.

It was too hot for him to attempt to get in there without help.

But a big kettle standing on the kitchen stove, and a strong smell of burning fat, told the story.

The housekeeper had set a big kettle of fat on the stove to melt.

In her brief absence it had run over and gotten afire.

The stream of burning fat, creeping across the kitchen floor, had started a blaze in the next room.

As he could do nothing yet, our hero took time to look around.

There was a pump under a small shed in the back yard.

Leaping down to the ground, Wide tried the pump.

It gave forth a good stream of water.

"It's the hose at the front window, and the bucket brigade here, then," he decided.

Out in the street, still some distance away, he could hear the jangle of good old Washington's bell.

He climbed the fence again, running around to the street.

As the apparatus came gallantly up, Wide leaped for his fire togs.

He had them on in a jiffy, while giving his orders.

"Terry, you and Joe stay here and work the stream in through the front window. Hal, you follow me to the back yard. It'll be the buckets there."

Hastily the young fire captain named six others who were to go to the back yard, too, and fill and pass buckets.

"Whenever you get the blaze down in front," wound up Wide, "work your way through the ground floor with the stream. But we'll do what we can with the buckets."

Hal and the chosen six had already darted down the alleyway.

Now the bucket brigade scaled the fence.

There being a big packing case in the yard, Wide and Hal dragged it up under one of the kitchen windows.

On this they stood.

"Fill the buckets and pass 'em lively!" shouted Wide.

Splash! The first water was going into the blazing kitchen.

Meanwhile, Terry had sent two of the fellows up with the hose on a short ladder to one of the parlor windows.

The stream was playing there in lively fashion.

Terry, finding little that he could do now, stood back by the hand engine talking with Joe.

Suddenly the basement door flew open.

A man took a startled look outside, then, drawing a revolver, dashed out.

"Joe! Joe! Here's Gregg Parks, the fire-bug!" yelled Terry.

He knew the fellow in an instant from the description.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

For just an instant Parks halted before the basement door, white, scared, desperate, dead, like a wolf at bay.

Then he dashed forward, aiming his pistol at Terry, who had leaped forward.

Terry drew back, watching to see how he could grapple without getting shot.

Gr-r-r-r!

That savage, bristling growl came from Trot, the coach-dog mascot of Washington One, who turned out at every fire.

Trot, not even knowing what a pistol was, was not afraid.

The dog made a grab, but gathered only a mouthful of trousers cloth, for Gregg Parks, with an oath, turned and darted down the alleyway.

As he ran he thrust the revolver back into his pocket.

"There goes Gregg Parks, the fire-bug!" yelled Terry, hoarsely.

With Joe, Terry and Trot close at his heels, the fire-bug dashed down the alley.

"We'll put the fire out for him!" thundered Young Wide Awake.

Hal soused the wretch, but Young Wide Awake dropped bucket and water together on his head.

Flop!

Gregg Parks was down—half-stunned.

It looked as if his race had been run.

Yet desperately he shook himself free as Terry and Joe piled upon him.

Bump! Young Wide Awake was down over the fence, Hal following him.

"We won't let him get away this time!" quivered the young fire captain.

But Parks, thrusting back his would-be captors, drew his revolver, sighted instantly for Young Wide Awake's head, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

But Trot had grabbed hard at the wretch's leg, causing Parks to fall backward in pain.

At the same instant Terry had thrown both arms around the fellow's neck from behind, drawing him over.

Thus, the fellow's arm thrown over, the bullet crashed into the timbers of the house above.

Wrench! Gregg Parks was borne to the ground, his right arm being almost broken in the doing of it.

Then Joe fell upon the prostrate fire-bug, hammering his face lustily.

"Let up on that," ordered Wide, sharply. "The fellow is helpless now. The law will give him dose enough."

Down the alley came a crowd, with Chief Sharp at its head.

"Here, turn him over," snapped the chief. "I'll put the bracelets on him."

"Don't be rough," came the fire-bug's muffled voice from

the ground, in which his mouth was buried. "I know when it's no use to put up a fight."

"Put up all the fight you like now," clicked Chief Sharp, as he clicked the handcuffs tight. "Your fighting days are about over, though, I reckon, Gregg Parks. We've got enough against you to all but hang you—and I'm not sure we won't be able to hang you before we get through with you!"

"Washington One, back to your posts!" rang out Young Wide Awake's voice. "Have you forgotten that we've got a fire to fight?"

With a scamper the young firemen returned to their posts.

Protective One, again a little late, reached the front of the house just as Chief Jason Sharp came to the street with his prisoner.

Two policemen pushed their way in at the chief's side.

It was necessary to hustle Gregg Parks off at once in order to save him from the angry crowd.

Fred Parsons speedily learned how the capture of the fire-bug had been brought about.

"Young Wide Awake again, of course," sneered Fred to Larry Downes. "We'll never get away from that hoodlum's wonderful deeds!"

"I wish we could do one or two ourselves," sighed Larry, but under his breath.

The fire in the parlor was first put out.

Then Terry sprang through the window with his fellows and fought his way back to the rear of the house.

The fire was downed at last.

Himble and Shilden got ten years each.

But Gregg Parks, when it came his turn to face the bar of justice, was sentenced for thirty years.

No judge is ever merciful with a fire-bug.

The news caused freer breathing at the Lester home.

Gregg Parks afterwards confessed that he had been asleep in the basement at the time when the accidental fire broke out.

"He played with fire so long that it destroyed him," was Young Wide Awake's grim comment, later in the day.

Belmont looked almost like a holiday town for the rest of the day.

The young firemen were treated like heroes wherever they went.

Even Trot, who had had a hand—or a mouth, rather—in the capture, was petted as long as he would endure the caresses.

That evening was one long remembered by two young men in the crew of Washington One.

These were Young Wide Awake and Terry Rourke.

Early in the afternoon they received word that they were expected at dinner that evening.

The invitation plainly intimated that no refusal would be accepted.

The hospitable, elegant Lester table looked that evening as if it had been laid for a state occasion.

After the meal, which was attended by much lively chat-

ter and good feeling all around, the diners adjourned to the parlors.

Mr. Lester and Mr. Vane soon rose, however, to find their way to the library for a quiet time with their cigars.

Just as they were about to leave the room, however, a servant stepped in with two cards.

"Mr. Frederick Parsons. Mr. Lawrence Downes," read Kitty's father from the little bits of pasteboard. "Where are they?"

"In the little reception-room," replied the servant.

"I'll go out and see the young men," replied Mr. Lester, grimly. "Come along, Vane."

The two fathers stepped out into the reception-room.

"Er—er—good evening, sir," stammered Fred, nervously, as he rose and held out his hand.

John Lester paid no attention to the hand, nor to the young man who owned it, either.

Instead, Mr. Lester turned to Larry Downes, looking him over keenly.

"Lawrence," said the old man, coolly, "all I can say to you is that I am sorry to see that you are keeping bad company."

"Why—why, sir," stammered Fred, turning fiery red, and then very white. "Do you mean to say——"

But John Lester never even glanced at this former admirer of his daughter.

"Lawrence," went on the old man, quietly, "I am sorry to say that I cannot consent to have my daughter receive visits from young men who keep bad company."

"But, surely, sir——" began Fred, tremulously, even whiningly.

"Lawrence," broke in the old man, coldly, "that is all I have to say. Good evening, Lawrence."

"And now, sir, one word!" cried Fred, appealingly.

Still John Lester did not look in his direction, but turned and led Mr. Vane in silence toward the library.

Fred Parsons was angrier than he had ever been in his life before.

"I—I don't know what to say—what to think!" he gasped.

"I do," rejoined Larry Downes, shrugging his shoulders. "It has been made pretty plain that we're not wanted here. The door is closed against us at this house. Well, come on. There are other people besides the Lesters."

"I should say so," muttered Fred, vengefully.

"This way out, gentlemen," came as a quiet hint from the servant, who still lingered at the doorway of the reception-room.

From the other side of the parlor door, as the young men passed, came the sound of merry young voices.

"Larry," asked Fred, wretchedly, "what can I do to send that fellow, Halstead, about his business, and get Kit to take notice of me again?"

"That's what you call an easy question, is it?" demanded Larry, impatiently. "Fred, it's as plain as the nose on your face that you're wasting your time thinking of Kit Lester. When a fellow has first chance with a girl, and

loses it plumb to another it's time for the first fellow to cut out and stay out."

"I believe I will cut out and stay out," muttered Fred, gloomily.

Back in the Lester parlors the young people had no direct means of knowing what had happened to the two recent callers or their cards.

Yet none of the young people had looked to see Fred and his friend admitted to the parlors.

Later in the evening Mrs. Vane went upstairs.

Mrs. Lester soon followed her.

Then, quite as a matter of course, the young people drifted into the music-room.

It was quite natural that they should do so.

For Terry, while standing beside Faith at the piano, could turn her music and slip in many a private word.

Equally, Young Wide Awake and Kitty, while seated at the further end of the room, could listen and yet carry on their own conversation.

"I wish your young friend, Brad Thompson, were here," suggested Kitty. "He played so brilliantly, so wonderfully, that evening he was here."

"Brad's a nice fellow," replied Wide. "But, just the same, I'm glad he's not here now."

"Why?"

"If he were here, Kit, and playing, you might be paying too much attention to him."

"Why not?"

"Kit, I'm afraid I'm jealous every time you pay too much attention to any one else," confessed the young fire captain.

"You foolish fellow, you don't need to be," was Kitty Lester's direct reply.

That response, and the look that came with it, gave Young Wide Awake another flutter at the heart.

THE END.

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